MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S

FANTASY

Magazine
Issue #28

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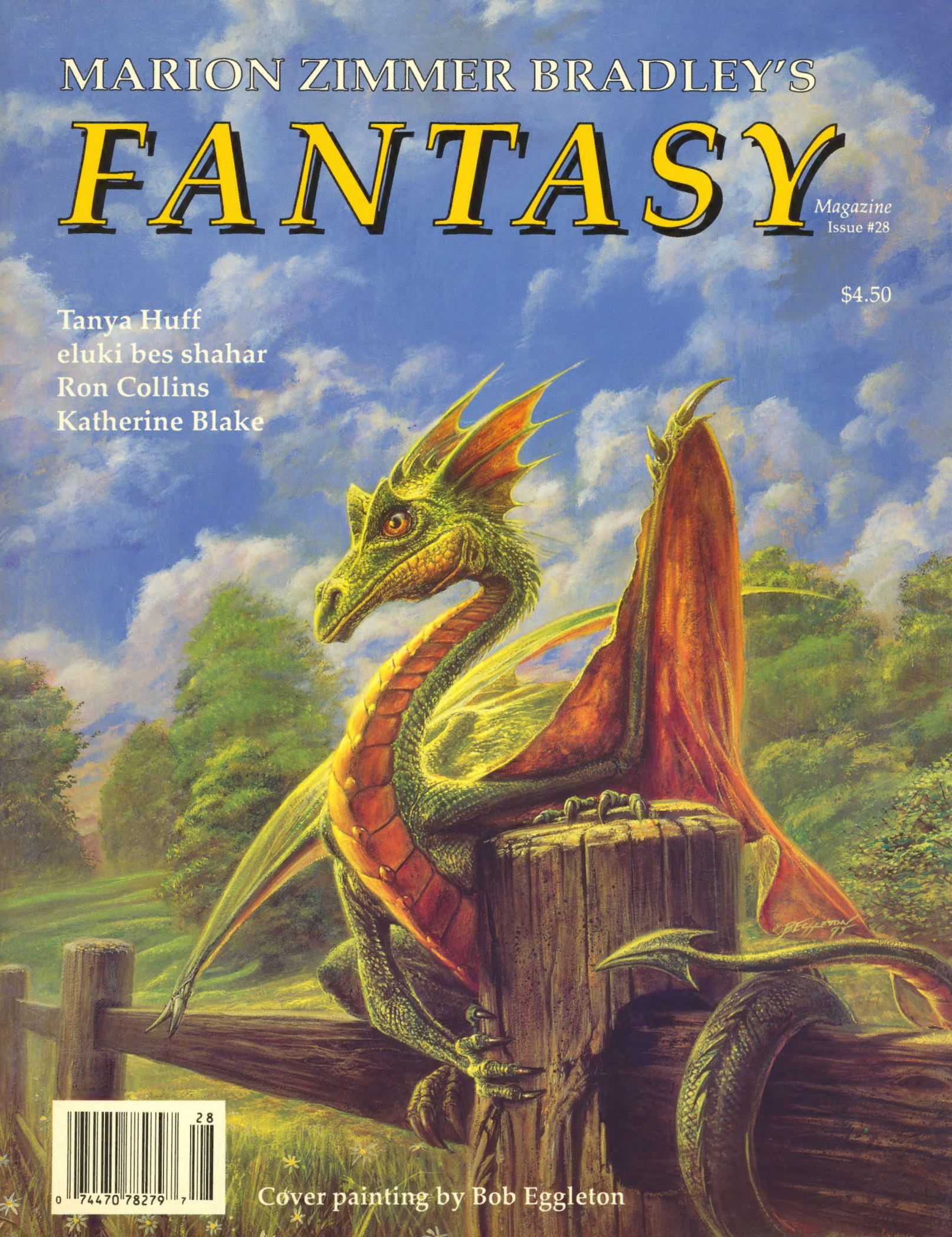
Ron Collins
Katherine Blake



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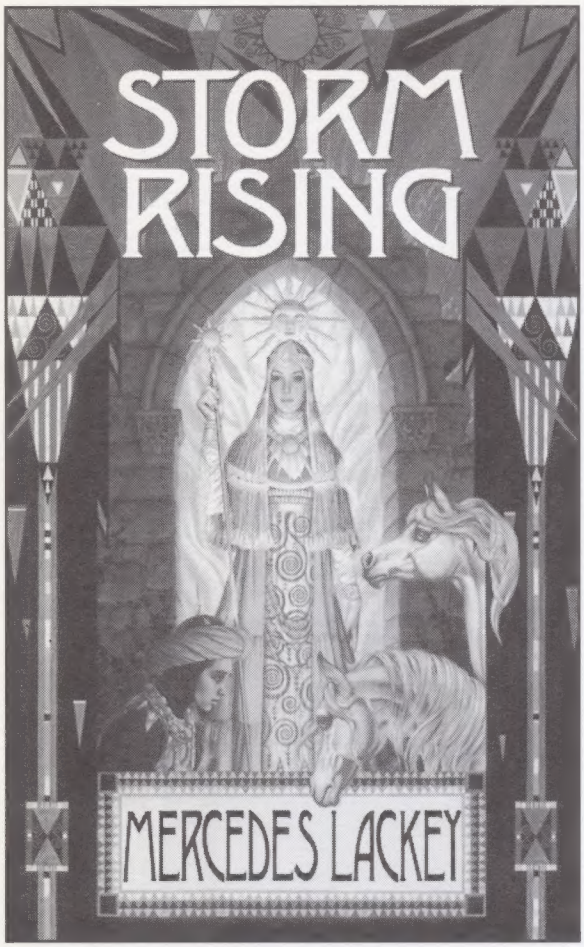

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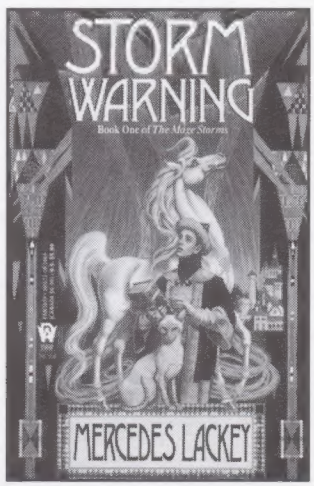

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FANTASY
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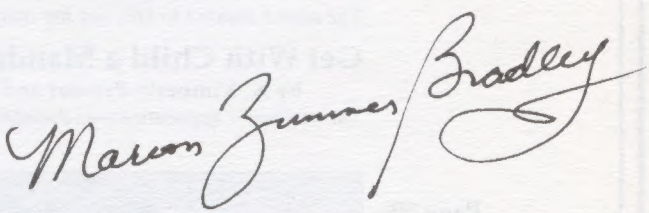
EDITORIAL

Editors and writers have one great advantage: for the most part, they are able to pick and choose their company. Some people even — mistakenly, I think — choose isolation. Even among the crowds at sf conventions, all kinds of security are given to you (wanted or not) and as much isolation as you care for or they can make you accept. Some writers seem to think that isolation is an essential part of the job. If you don't believe me, you should hear some new members of SFWA complaining about how hard it is to find time and space for writing. Any person who's serious about writing can meditate in Victoria Station — and still catch his train. Someone who makes a fuss about needing isolation, or the equivalent of Proust's cork-lined room, is posturing — displaying how sensitive he wants you to think he is.

I've been writing for most of my adult life, usually with little kids playing and screeching all over the house. I recall hearing of a well-known writer who, for a bet or charity or something, wrote a story in Macy's window at Christmas. I think it may have been Harlan Ellison or Norman Spinrad — I don't recall which — but I do remember seeing a picture of Macy's window, writer and all. Or perhaps it was some mainstream writer. For some reason, the story is linked in my mind with Somerset Maugham, but it couldn't have been him, he was too shy. The story about Maugham recounts when he was asked to speak to a writer's group. He looked around the room, and inquired, "I suppose all of you want to be writers?" There was a general sound of acclaim, to which Maugham stammered, "Then why aren't you all at home doing it?"



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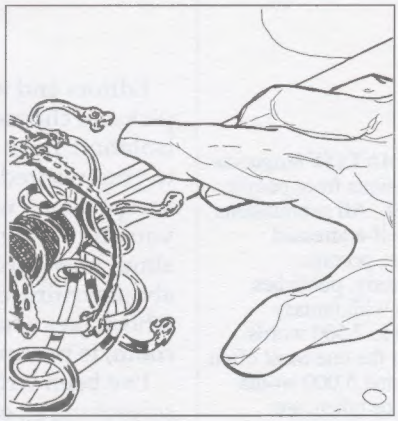

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by Tanya Huff; art by Bob Eggleton

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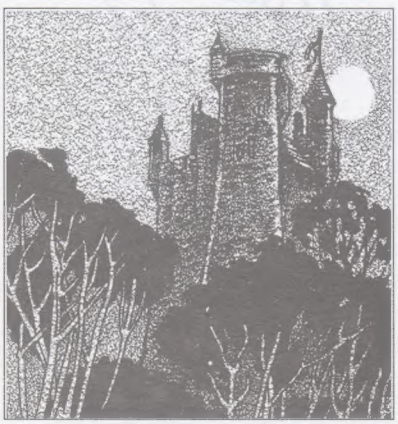

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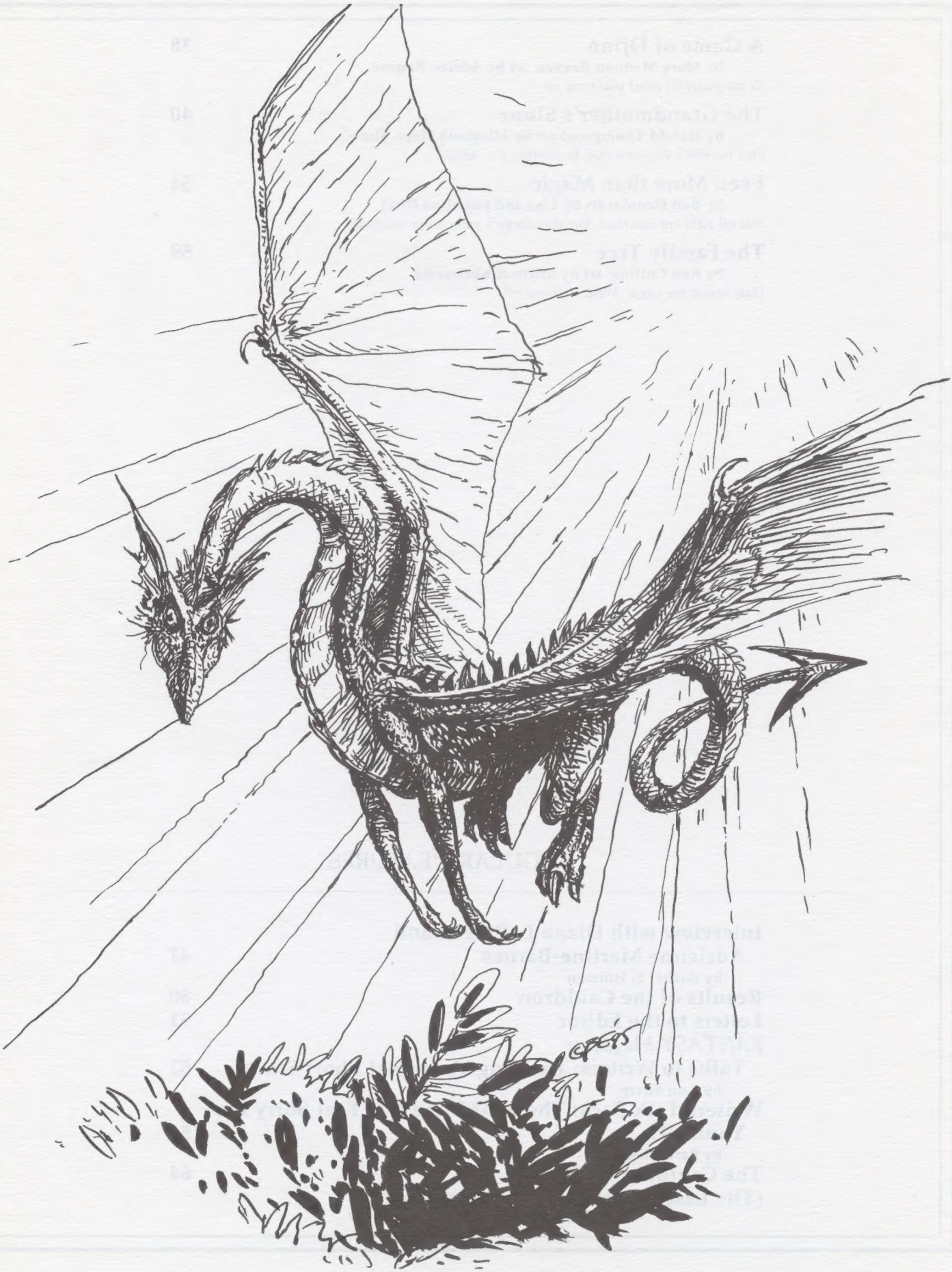

Artwork by Bob Eggleton

The Harder They Fall

by Tanya Huff

"Daddy?" Alison put her glass in the sink and stared out the kitchen window. "Daddy?" she repeated a little louder. "There's a dragon at the hummingbird feeder."

"You mean a dragonfly, sweetie."

"No, I *don't*." She was as certain as only a nearly-five-year-old could be. "I mean a *dragon*."

Colin Ostrander put his screwdriver down amidst the ruins of the toaster and stood, sternly repressing a preoccupied, "That's nice, dear." Just last night, he and his wife had agreed that they had to become more involved in their daughter's life. Granted, Alison was always seeing the weird and wonderful, but didn't any magic his daughter could find in the mess that adults had made of the world deserve to be investigated? Besides, the toaster had, for the moment, completely defeated him.

"All right, Ali, let's see your dra..."

There was a dragon at the hummingbird feeder.

Coiled once around the neck of the bulb, it clung to the overloaded feeder with tiny, handlike front claws, nose pressed tight against one of the plastic flowers. Green scales gleamed iridescent in the summer sunlight and its folded wings enclosed it in a shimmering gossamer tent. Its dangling tail traced lazy arcs of obvious contentment.

"Oh my lord, that's a dragon."

Alison sighed. "That's what I *said*, Daddy. Isn't it pretty?"

The wasps that perpetually plagued the hummingbirds were nowhere in sight. Neither, for that matter, were the hummingbirds.

The level of red sugar-water in the bulb dropped noticeably as they watched.

Colin found himself clutching the edge of the counter so tightly it creaked a protest. "Where could it have come from?"

Just then the dragon lifted its head. Topaz eyes stared into the kitchen while a scarlet tongue tasted the air.

"Where's your mother?" Janet would never believe this if she didn't see it for herself.

"Mommy's in the garage."

With a sudden slither, the dragon dropped from the feeder, spreading its wings barely in time to avoid impact with the flowers below. About two feet long from nose to tail tip, stomach visibly rounded, it flew laboriously across the backyard.

No time to get Janet, Colin decided. "Come on, Ali. Let's go after it!"

"Nah." She shrugged and headed for the living room. "I'm gonna play Super Mario."

No time to argue. The dragon had almost reached the rail fence and once it got into the fields and woods beyond the row of neat suburban/country houses, he'd lose it for sure. The screen door slamming shut behind him, Colin leapt off the back porch and raced across the lawn. Here was actual proof of magic and myth still in the world and he wasn't going to let it get away.

Clearly straining, the dragon managed enough altitude to crest the top cedar rail, then locked its wings and dropped into a long shallow glide.

Colin scrambled over the fence after it, sank into the weeds on the other side with an audible squelch, stumbled sideways, and drove the thorns of a wild rose through his sock and into his ankle. Caught up in the chase, he hardly felt the pain.

The dragon peered back over its shoulder, turning its head almost a complete 180 degrees so that its nose pointed down the valley between its wings. Even almost fifteen feet away, Colin was sure he saw its eyes widen. Facing front, it put on a frantic burst of speed.

Sneakers sinking into wet ground, brambles snagging bare flesh between socks and shorts, Colin sprinted after it. "This is amazing," he panted, pushing through a stand of dog-willow fast enough to raise welts. "What am I going to do if I catch up to it?"

The question seemed moot as up ahead the dragon flashed once in the sun, dove toward the ground, and disappeared.

"Oh no you don't!" He fought his way past a clump of prickly ash with only a minor loss of blood and came to the edge of a small clearing just in time to see the tip of a green tail vanish into

Artwork by Bob Eggleton

the shadowed recess below a fallen cedar. Sucking at a laceration on his wrist, Colin raced towards the downed tree; as the dragon hadn't reappeared it must still be under there.

"Hey, dragon. It's okay." He dropped to his knees. "I'm not going to hurt you. I just want to..." With no idea of what it was he just wanted to do, he let the reassurance trail off. Bending almost double, he peered eagerly into the shadows.

The dragon was nowhere in sight but the tree was covering a cleft in the earth about thirty inches long by eighteen inches wide.

Colin stretched out a hand then, rational again for a moment, paused and sniffed the breeze. Not much — not even the magic of an actual dragon — could stand against the reality of a skunk. The whole family had learned that lesson just after they'd moved out here from the city, and it wasn't one he was anxious to repeat. As his nose declared the hole unoccupied, he balanced awkwardly on his knees, bent under the edge of the fallen tree, and squinted into the earth.

Was that light? A flash of green?

Inching ahead, he stretched both arms down into the hole. It appeared to continue, with no significant change in dimension, far deeper than he could reach. A faint light rose up from the bottom. He could see the outlines of rock below in spite of the fallen tree above blocking the sun.

"Just a little farther... "

In the best tradition, it proved just a little too far.

The loosened dirt at the lip gave way. The rock he tried to brace his hands against crumbled out of the wall. Unable to prevent it, he tumbled forward — not quickly, for the passageway was barely wider than he was, but inevitably.

Gravity spilled him out of the cleft and into a passageway brilliantly lit by light reflected from thousands of pieces of embedded quartz where a bewildering array of tiny rainbows danced in the air. A little stunned — *at least Alice didn't land on her head* — he pushed himself along with elbows and toes, squinting against the glare. As he hadn't landed on the dragon when he fell, squashing it into an iridescent smear on the rock, he reasoned, somewhat muzzily, that he had to still be following it.

He'd traveled between ten and fifteen feet when the world tilted sideways. Perceptions scrambled, he threw himself forward until the physical structure of the passage reformed itself around him. When his head emerged into a circular cavern about six feet in diameter, he collapsed, panting. Half out of the tunnel, leaning his weight on the less abraded of his arms, he lifted the other hand to shade his watering eyes from the sunlight pouring in through a fissure directly across from him.

There was still no sign of the dragon but piled against the curve of the cavern wall was a curious collection of chunks of quartz and bits of strangely shaped metal that could only be its hoard.

Inching the rest of the way out of the passage, Colin carefully got to his feet. Nothing seemed to be too terribly damaged. *Okay, first of all, find out where you are.* They'd been living in that house for three years and none of the neighbors had ever mentioned finding a cave in the area. *Of course, they've never mentioned finding a dragon either...*

Shoving aside a strangely-shaped bush, Colin ducked and stepped out into the open air —

And very nearly tripped over the dragon stretched out on a rock ledge, basking in the sun.

Up close, it reminded Colin of nothing so much as an elongated cat, for its expression said clearly, *Oh, puh-leez, I've just gotten comfortable. Surely you don't expect me to move?* When he stepped forward, it managed to look simultaneously disgruntled and wary, wings spreading slightly, forked tongue flicking out to taste the air. Colin froze, worried that, frightened, it might fly away. Heart racketing about in his chest, he slowly slid his hand into the

pocket of his shorts.

The dragon's head whipped back, eyes locked on the movement.

His fingers closed around a sticky, plastic-wrapped rectangle. Still moving slowly, he drew it out. Two days ago, in town, he'd bought Alison a large grape sucker. Six or seven licks into it, when the stick had snapped, she'd decided she no longer wanted it and it had ended up stuffed in Daddy's pocket for later.

"Well, we know you've got a sweet tooth..."

A second later he was counting his fingers as the dragon devoured sucker, wrapper, and remnant of stick with obvious enjoyment.

Which was when it hit him.

His legs buckled and he sat down suddenly, painfully, on a pointed rock. He'd just fed a two-day-old sucker to a dragon a little smaller than the family cat. This was not the sort of thing that happened to boring, thirty-something software analysts.

"Maybe I slipped on my way across the kitchen," he said thoughtfully to the dragon as it climbed onto his lap and began nosing through his clothes, "and all this is just my subconscious keeping me amused while I'm being rushed to hospital in a coma. Ouch! Watch those claws!"

Setting the dragon aside with one hand, he rubbed at the four bleeding, parallel scratches dug into his thigh with the other. This dragon, this wondrous, miraculous dragon, was painfully real. "Maybe," he told it, stroking the warm curve of an offered belly with something very close to reverence, "you're the sort of thing that happens to fathers of almost-five-year-olds."

"What ho, dragon! Thou art named arrant and most pernicious worm. Come hither and fight!" The voice, thinned by distance and strangely high-pitched, held the distinct sound of threat.

The dragon flipped back onto its feet, scrambled over Colin's legs, and dove into the cave.

"If that's one of the Dushane kids..." Colin leaned forward until he could see off the ledge.

About twenty feet away was a sort of a plateau and on that plateau was a meadow fifteen feet square, and in that meadow was a knight in armor on a horse, also in armor. The sun gleamed off polished steel, and although the breeze snapped the pennant on the lance tip gaily back and forth, the weapon itself appeared grimly businesslike. The only problem was, the mounted knight wasn't much more than a foot high.

Which explained the high-pitched voice but not much else.

Colin wiped suddenly sweaty palms on his shorts as he finally realized that the strangely-shaped bush beside the cave entrance was a full-grown tree. That all the bushes surrounding the meadow were trees. *There's only one logical...* No, somehow logical wasn't the right word... *one possible explanation. I'm definitely not in Kansas anymore.* It didn't seem to matter that he'd never been to Kansas. *It had to have happened back in that tunnel when things slipped out of whack.* The hair on the back of his neck lifted. *I went through a magical portal.* Somehow, he seemed to have been flung into one of the fairy tales he read to his daughter. *I thought that sort of thing only happened in wardrobes!*

Although he realized that perhaps he should be, he wasn't afraid. He'd trust the magic that had brought him through to get him home again. It was Alison's magic after all.

"What ho, dragon!" the knight called a second time, rising in his stirrups. "I, Sir Jorrin of Barrowford, do challenge thee to single combat for the sake of honor and in the name of his most gracious majesty, King Bryant. Come hither and fight!"

Colin felt the dragon's wedge-shaped head push under his arm, and he almost thought he heard it sigh as it also gazed down at the knight. "I wouldn't worry about it," he murmured comfortingly, "there's no way he can climb up onto this ridge in that outfit."

"What ho, dragon! By the avouchment made in the exordium of time, that which pledges the great worms to answer when summoned thrice, I challenge thee for the third and final time. Come hither and..."

"Hold it, buddy!" Colin leapt to his feet, tumbling the dragon behind him. While he had no idea what an avouchment was, no diminutive St. George was forcing *this* dragon to fight. "Just what do you think you're doing?"

It took Sir Jorrin a moment to regain control of his horse and he lost his lance in the process. Finally managing to draw his sword, he yanked his mount

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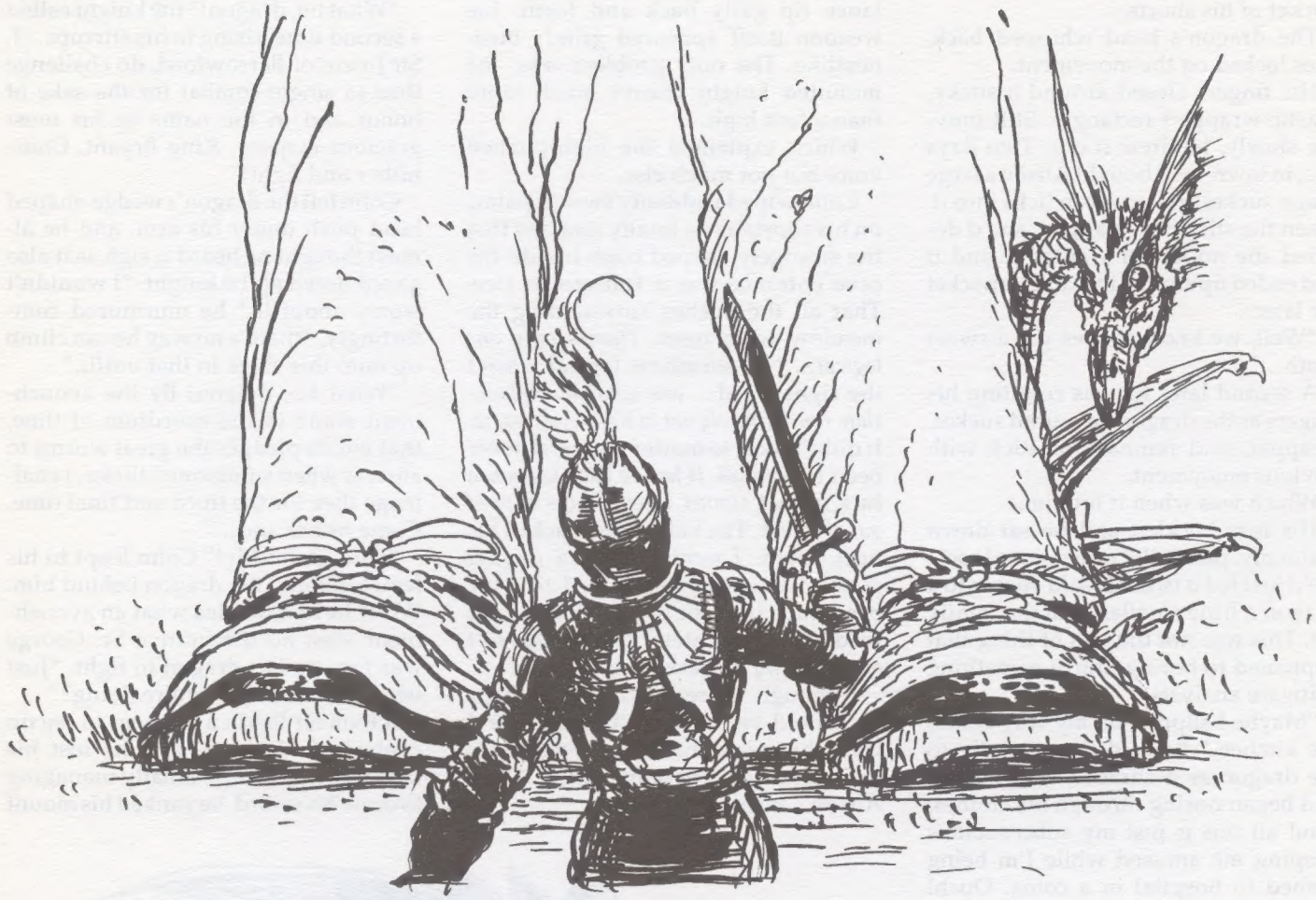

Artwork by Bob Eggleton

around until it faced up the mountain again.

"What ho, giant!" he yelled, voice even higher pitched than it had been. "Thou art named, uh, megatherian and uh, most, uh, well, uh, most prodigious great. Come hither and fight!"

"I will not!"

"What ho, giant! I, Sir Jorrin of Barrowford, do challenge..."

"Look, you stay right there. I'm coming down." Shooing the dragon back inside the cave and telling it to stay put, Colin climbed down the ridge to the plateau, Sir Jorrin continuing his challenge in the background.

As Colin stepped onto the meadow and his size became apparent, the knight's horse reared and headed for the trees at full gallop, reins trailing and rider left lying helmless on the grass. Colin reached down to help but an expression of terror stopped his hand a foot from the ground. "Are you all right?" he asked instead. "Are you hurt?"

Golden curls in disarray, Sir Jorrin pushed himself into a kneeling position and searched frantically about in the grass.

"Sir Jorrin?"

At the sound of his name, his search grew more frantic still.

Well, we're not going to accomplish anything until he finds it. Colin scanned the grass from his superior vantage point and plucked the miniature sword from out of the sod. "Here." Carefully holding the three-inch blade between thumb and forefinger, he squatted and offered the knight the hilt.

Still on his knees, Sir Jorrin grabbed for it with both hands.

Colin released the blade. "Now, put it away before you hurt someone."

Driving the point into the ground, Sir Jorrin used it to lever himself laboriously to his feet

"Well?" Colin insisted pointedly as the blade remained unsheathed.

"God's teeth, giant!" Panting slightly, Sir Jorrin glared up at him, terror shoved aside by indignation. "I am *not* a child. I am an anointed knight and a man full three and twenty years old!"

Somewhat taken aback, Colin spread his hands in a conciliatory gesture. "Did I say you weren't?"

"Thou art treating me as though I were but moments back pulled mewling from the tit!"

"I am?"

"Thou art!"

"Sorry. It's that you're so, so..." He was eleven inches high is what he was and prejudices said adults were *not* eleven inches high. Colin felt heartily ashamed of himself. *All right. So let's say he's vertically challenged and leave it at that.*

"I have never heard of giants in this place before." Sir Jorrin's tone made it an accusation.

"I'm not exactly from around here."

"Then where?"

Why not tell him? "I came through a magic portal in the mountain."

"This mountain?"

"Yes."

"Thy home is on the other side?"

The *other side*; seemed accurate enough in the classical sense. "Yes."

"Hast thou come then to be the dragon's champion? To answer the challenge in its place?" Without turning his back, Sir Jorrin moved to where his helm had fallen and scooped it up.

"Well..." Well, somebody had to do it or the poor dragon would end up looking like those pictures of slaughtered baby seals that Greenpeace had plastered North America with back in the Seventies. Except of course that the dragon had scales instead of fur and didn't look at all like a seal and it was about to be spitted not clubbed. Actually, he had to acknowledge, it wasn't a very good analogy. More importantly, what would Alison say if she knew her Daddy had allowed the dragon to be killed? "Okay, what will it take for you to go away and leave the dragon alone?"

"If it is thy desire that I leave, giant, thou must first defeat me in single combat." Apparently undaunted by the prospect of fighting someone almost six times his size, Sir Jorrin cheerfully clapped his helm on his head took a deep breath and bellowed, "What ho, giant! Thou art named megatherian and most prodigious great. Come hither and fight!

"Is that your answer to everything?" Colin asked sharply. "Fighting?"

Sir Jorrin looked confused. "I am a knight. It is what we do."

"Well, I am *not* a knight and it's *not* what I do." *What do I do? Got any programs you need debugged? This is ridiculous.* But since he'd opened his big mouth... "I, uh, negotiate."

"What means this, negotiate?"

"It means that instead of fighting, we talk."

"Ah. If it is thy desire to talk, go ahead and while thou art talking, I shall fight the dragon. Although," the knight added peevishly, taking a few practice cuts at the air, "it would be a great deal easier if my niddering horse and equally niddering squire had remained. No doubt the two of them are back at Kiramar by now." He took one final swing then turned to face up the mountain. "What ho, dragon!"

"Sir Jorrin. We *have* to talk about this."

"I have no time for talk, I must needs rid the land of this arrant and pernicious worm."

"Oh." Colin hadn't considered that. "Does it eat maidens then?"

"Maidens?" Sir Jorrin laughed. "*I* never found any maidens in these parts. No," he continued, oblivious to the tatters of chivalric myth, "no maidens. But it flies over the villages, affrighting persons and livestock. Oftimes in the year, it takes a sheep or calf."

"A sheep or calf?" *That was all?* "And you're going to kill it for that?"

Sir Jorrin snorted. "Not likely. His Majesty has offered a dukedom to the knight who can best the beast."

"You're going to kill the dragon for personal profit?" Like the rest of his generation, Colin had no problem with upward mobility but, as an archetype, Sir Jorrin was becoming a bit of a disappointment. "What about honor?"

Under his armor, Sir Jorrin shrugged. "What about it?" he asked.

Colin sighed. Eleven inches of knight braced himself against the gust. "This is getting us nowhere fast." He checked his watch. He should be getting home but Janet could look after Alison for a little while longer. "I think I need to talk to someone in charge."

"Thou art desirous of speech with his Majesty?"

"If he's the one who makes things happen, the local CEO, then yes."

"No!"

"Why not?"

"Thou art a giant!"

"So?" Colin resisted the urge to throw in a Fee Fie Fo Fum — which was the only giantspeak he could remember.

"It is not what is done with giants!"

"Why not?"

Tiny golden brows drew down. "If I take thee to my King, what will stop thee from destroying him?"

"Destroying him? I just want to *talk*."

"Again, talk." Sir Jorrin chopped absently at a buttercup with his sword, obviously deep in thought. After a moment he looked up and asked, "How can I be *certain* thou wilt but talk?"

How indeed. *I suppose a citation from the Chamber of Commerce for civic responsibility won't cut it.* Then suddenly Colin had a truly brilliant idea. "I tell you what, Sir Jorrin, I'll take the most sacred oath of my people." Straightening to his full height, he solemnly traced an ex across his chest. "Cross my heart and hope to die, stick a finger in my eye, my nose drops off if I tell a lie." Alison had come up with the last phrase herself and been inordinately proud of it. It seemed like the sort of thing that a man enamored of shouting *What ho!* might be impressed by.

"Quite the oath, giant." Sir Jorrin turned it over a moment longer, seemed to settle an internal argument, and sheathed his sword. "Very well. Let us waste no time."

"How far is it?"

"A three-hour ride." The knight looked disgusted. "A longer walk."

"Three hours!"

"Hast thou better things to do?"

"I have to get home." Colin looked back up at the dragon's cave and caught a glimpse of sunlight reflecting off iridescent green scales. It was the color of the leaves in Sherwood Forest. It was the color of the Emerald City. It was the color of his little girl's eyes — well, actually Alison's eyes were more hazel but in some lights they looked sort of green. *And Alison's daddy can't quit now.* "I guess I can be a little late." He'd have to tell Janet he'd got lost in the woods. While she'd believe that, she'd never believe this.

"Perhaps," Colin suggested after he'd crossed the meadow in three long strides and then waited fifteen minutes for Sir Jorrin to catch up, "I should carry you."

"Carry me?" panted Sir Jorrin. "I tell thee again, giant, I am no... uh..." He wiped a sweaty brow with an equally sweaty hand and sighed deeply. "Mayhap thou shouldst."

Sir Jorrin's "three-hour gentle ride" took about forty minutes of steady walking. They paused once, Colin regretting the four cups of coffee he'd had that morning before leaving home. Unfortunately, the rocky ground was unable to absorb such a quantity of liquid and the steaming stream washed away a section of the path. *I guess I should've aimed downhill.*

"Incredible!" exclaimed Sir Jorrin when he was retrieved.

During the speculation that followed, Colin tried not to feel smug.

When they reached the first of the farms, he became too preoccupied with finding a place to safely put his feet to pay Sir Jorrin much attention. Fortunately, there were few fences, a great deal of fallow land, and most of the people either barricaded themselves inside squat stone buildings or screamed and ran for the woods. The one exception raced towards him and jabbed a pitchfork through the top of his running shoe.

"A stupid man," observed Sir Jorrin as the next step left the farmer far behind. "But a brave one."

"Right," Colin agreed tightly, shaking the pitchfork loose.

"If thy foot-coverings were not thick enough to keep it out, thou hast better hope there was no ordure on the prongs. 'Twill cause a wound to putrefy most wondrously."

"Thank you, Sir Jorrin."

With his brain attempting to operate on the scale it was used to, it seemed that next to no time passed between spotting Kiramar in the distance and arriving in the cleared area outside the waist-high wall. It looked, Colin decided, just the way a city in a fairy tale should. *Kind of like Barbie and Ken do Camelot.*

"Unless thou art impervious to arrow fire," Sir Jorrin told him dryly, "I should wait here."

"For how long?" He couldn't look at his watch without dropping his hitchhiker but the sun seemed nearly straight up. It had to be close to noon.

"Not long. Watch the Dragongate."

"The what?"

"The gate we face in the wall."

A few moments later, the Dragongate opened just far enough for a mounted knight to ride out. The gleaming figure stopped about ten inches from the wall and set his lance.

"What ho, giant! Thou art named ponderous and most minacious calumniator! Come hither and..." The knight broke off, raised a gauntletted hand, and lifted his visor. "Sir Jorrin?"

Explanations took a while. At the request of the city council, Colin tried not to fidget. Sir Jorrin disappeared, leaving him staring at the crowds who'd climbed to the top of the city wall to stare at him. Eventually, a man no more than nine inches tall and trying desperately hard to make up for it, came out to tell him that the king had graciously agreed to grant him an audience.

"As the wall is too high for thee to step over and climbing would damage both it and the buildings against it, mayhap thou canst squirm though the Dawngate. Surely th'art not wider than four wagons."

"Can't his Majesty talk with me out here?" Colin wondered.

Apparently not.

He wasn't wider than four wagons, but it was close. While squirming, he tried to ignore the embarrassingly frank suggestions from the watching crowds and tried harder to ignore what he was squirming in. By partially dislocating one shoulder, he got through the gate and standing again without doing any more than a very minor bit of destruction. An escort of mounted knights waited for him inside and Colin made his way carefully from gate to palace behind them, his sense of wonder fighting for survival against the stench of open sewers.

The wall around the palace was more decorative than functional and reached only just above knee high. He cautiously stepped over it and into a courtyard where he was, once again, told to wait.

Just like home. He eased down onto the cobblestones, back to the wall, in the one position he could manage without crushing anything. *They tell you that you've got an appointment, then make you wait some more.*

Under shadowed scrutiny from every window, Colin went over the argument he intended to present to the king, wishing that he'd paid more attention to the boys in marketing. All he could remember was a mouthful of teeth that had to have been capped and a lengthy justification of expense accounts, neither of which would be of much use under the circumstances.

After what seemed like hours, the officious little man reappeared followed by an anthill's worth of servants who swarmed over a balcony by Colin's head laying carpet, hanging tapestries, and finally setting up what had to be a small throne.

"Will it take much longer?" Colin asked.

The official didn't even bother to look at his. "His Majesty will see thee shortly."

A less magical tone could not be imagined. His dentist's receptionist had one just like it.

Then, as suddenly as they'd appeared, servants and official disappeared. A trumpet sounded, the balcony doors swung open, and out stepped a man Sir Jorrin's size but older, his hair and beard liberally streaked with gray. *Actually, he looks like Sean Connery in a good rug and a crown. I hope my breath is okay.*

Settling himself on the throne, King Bryant gripped intricately carved wooden arms tightly enough to turn his fingertips white. "So, giant, Sir Jorrin hath told me much about thee. It is thy desire to speak with me concerning the dragon?"

Colin approved of his Majesty getting straight to the point. He'd always been terrible at small talk. "Right. The dragon." Fortunately, he'd just received the quarterly package from the World Wildlife Fund and while dragons weren't exactly snail darters or black-footed ferrets and the destruction of the Brazilian rainforest certainly didn't affect them, the text could be adapted to fit. Becoming increasingly impassioned, he wrapped up with an emotional plea for wonder and diversity in the universe, lifted in its entirety from a classic *Star Trek* episode.

When he finished, King Bryant, looking much less tense, leaned forward and said, "If th'art saying the dragon is magical, th'art wrong. It is nothing more or less than a giant flying lizard."

Kings, Colin decided, should be less literal. "No, your Majesty, I'm saying the dragon represents all the things that are magic and wonderful in the world and you shouldn't allow people like Sir Jorrin to keep trying to kill it."

"Allow?" Tiny brows rose imperiously. "Giant, I did not allow Sir Jorrin to challenge the dragon. I encouraged him."

"Encouraged him? But why?"

"Because Sir Jorrin is young and strong and ambitious and deserves a chance to win a dukedom."

"But you should be *protecting* the dragon!"

"From what?"

"Well, essentially, from everything. And you should be finding a mate for it. Trying to get it to breed."

King Bryant stared up at him in astonishment. "Then we should have more than one."

"And just think what that would do for the tourist industry."

"The what?"

"People would pay to see a family of dragons in their natural habitat. You could open a theme park. Sell t-shirts. Finance civic improvements."

"Thy words are strange, giant." Shaking his head, the king stood. "Thy thoughts are stranger. I shall consider them. We will speak again when thou hast been refreshed."

"But..."

The balcony door swung shut.

Colin could only wait.

And wait.

Finally, a door opened by his left knee and what appeared to be the same crowd of servants rolled out half of a huge wooden barrel which they then filled with buckets of water. As attempting to talk to them only brought panicked retreats and a damp courtyard, Colin gave up and tried, not very successfully, to stretch his legs.

With the barrel full, a bucolic looking young man dragged a confused and protesting cow out into the courtyard by a rope halter and left it there.

Colin gratefully drank the water. After a few moments of terror, the cow settled down and began chewing a bit of topiary.

There wasn't a bush ungnawed in the courtyard by the time the king returned. "Thou wast not hungry?" he asked, indicating the cow with the sweep of his hand.

Colin winced. He was supposed to eat the cow? Alive? "Uh, no. Thank you." Whatever happened to a dozen tiny loaves of bread; roast turkeys the size of chickadees; great bowls of custard, sweet and creamy and swallowed whole? Obviously, some fairy tales had better catering than others.

"I have considered your words," King Bryant told him solemnly, "and have decided that my knights will no longer hunt the dragon."

"Your Majesty! That's wonderful!" By God, he'd done it! The dragon was safe! A traditional happy ending and *he* was responsible. Alison was going to be so proud of her daddy.

The king regarded him speculatively. "Is it true that thou didst carry Sir Jorrin down the mountain?"

"Well, yes. His horse had run off and he couldn't walk very quickly in armor and I didn't have much time... and good grief, is that the time?" Carefully, so as not to step on the cow, Colin got to his feet. "You've made the right decision, Your Majesty, you'll see." Pins and needles exploded up his right leg, a thousand tiny points of pain. In the interests of diplomacy, he hid the grimace in a smile. "Thank you for your time. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've *really* got to go."

"Home?"

"Yes, home."

"As thou hast carried Sir Jorrin, wouldst thou carry his king to the city wall on thy way out?"

Colin smiled. From playgrounds to battlefields, people didn't change. If one kid had a sucker then all the kids had to have a sucker. If one country had nuclear capabilities then all the countries had to have nuclear capabilities. If Sir Jorrin had been carried by a giant then the king had to be carried by a giant. "Of course, Your Majesty."

It was much easier to squirm out of the city than it had been to squirm in. At the king's request, Colin carried him around the outside of Kiramar to the Dragonsgate and set him down on top of the wall, the line of guards that stretched around a quarter curve, parting to let him in.

"The giant," the king announced, "is going home."

The guards cheered, waving their bows over their heads. Colin smiled and waved back, reassuring King Bryant that he could find his way to the meadow without a guide.

The king seemed to approve. "Then

Artwork by Bob Eggleton

good-bye, giant. It has been..." He paused, appeared to discard several words, and finally finished with, "... interesting."

With his hands free of knight, Colin made better time on the way up than he had on the way down and, although people still screamed and ran, no one tried to stick a pitchfork in him. Humming "Puff the Magic Dragon" as he walked, in a little under half an hour, sweating and with a stitch in his side, he arrived back at the meadow.

All in all, it had been the sort of day that dreams were made of. Still favoring the pulled muscle in his left shoulder, he bent and scratched at some of the dried blood on his knee — whether it came from the prickly ash, the shards of quartz, or the dragon's claws he wasn't entirely certain but every bump, every bruise had been worth it. He couldn't wait to see Alison's eyes light up when he told her what he'd done.

"What ho, giant!"

"Sir Jorrin!" Colin grinned down at the knight. "How did you get back up here so quickly?"

"As thou wast entering the Dawngate, I rode from the Dragongate with the city between us. His Majesty kept thee long enough for me to return to this place."

"Have you come to see me off?"

"In a manner of speaking," the knight replied. Behind him, a line of archers rose to their feet, and continued to rise until the meadow was almost completely enclosed in a circle of longbows. "I have come to see that thou art stopped."

"What?"

"I have come to kill thee."

"What!"

"Kill thee," Sir Jorrin repeated. Then, just in case there might still be some confusion, he added, "Dead."

"But why?" A fantasy land of miniature knights and dragons he could manage to cope with but this was something else again.

"Because thou art a giant." Tone and manner added a clear *Why else?*

"That's hardly a good enough reason!" They weren't actually going to kill him. That sort of thing happened in books and movies but not in the real world.

"If thou must needs have an explanation," Sir Jorrin sighed, "know that as thou wilt not be bound by challenge, thou art dangerously unpredictable, creating a grave threat to the kingdom. This I told my king. But of more danger is the certainty that where there is one giant there must be others and unless we would have the kingdom overrun, something must be done. When I told him of thy vow, His Majesty agreed to keep thee talking — and this desire to talk is, I vow, the strangest thing about thee — whilst I, with a company of archers, returned to the place I first saw thee to wait and kill thee before thou canst go back under the mountain and lead thy people through."

"But I wouldn't! Cross my heart and hope to die!"

"Precisely," said Sir Jorrin. "The arrows," he added, "are poisoned. We could, of course, have shot thee from the city walls as thou didst leave but that would have meant thy great corpse would rot before Kiramar, bringing pestilence and no doubt plague as well. Here, the dragon will devour thy carcass and the sun will bake thy bones clean and they shall lie as silent witness to challengers of the worm."

"Challengers? Hold it right there! The king promised me his knights would stop hunting the dragon!"

"The king's word shall stand. We have no need to hunt the dragon for we *know* where it is."

Why that royal... "So you're going to keep trying to kill it?"

"It is a dragon. *That* is what one does with dragons. Ready the bows."

Colin stared down at the ring of archers, or more specifically at the ring of metal points that tipped each angled shaft and suddenly realized that the safety of the dragon had become a secondary concern. "Hang on! You're kidding, right?"

"Thou art a giant," Sir Jorrin pointed out reasonably. "*This* is what one does with giants. Aim."

Apparently, he wasn't kidding. The arrows were three, maybe four inches long. Not really very threatening except that Colin had recently seen a *National Geographic* special about some tribe in the Amazon basin that used poison darts half that size to kill people. Or maybe he'd seen it in a television adaptation of an old Indiana Jones movie. He'd worry about it later. If he had a later.

He was big enough that stomping the archers into the ground became a viable option if he could just overcome a lifetime of conditioning. He lifted his foot and with "*Pick on someone your own size*" ringing in his ears, put it down again.

For obvious reasons, no one stood directly in front of the ridge leading up to the dragon's cave. Colin threw himself through the gap, the closest archers diving away from his charge, and scrambled at panicked speed up the rocky slope.

Behind him, he heard Sir Jorrin scream, "Fire!"

It felt like he'd been stung by wasps a half a dozen times in each buttock. Yelping in pain, he leapt forward and got both hands onto the lip of the dragon's ledge just in time to hear the knight admonishing his men to fire at will. A few arrows thudded into the thick, ridged rubber sole of his shoe but the rest fell short as, with strength he never knew he had, he dragged himself up onto the ledge and out of immediate danger.

Inching towards the cave mouth on his stomach, he paused a moment before entering to reach around and pluck out the arrows still quivering in his flesh. They hurt more coming out than they did going in but he supposed that if he *had* to be shot with poisoned arrows then he couldn't think of a place more insulated from anything vital. The pounding of his heart, the multiple trickles of sweat, and his ragged breathing were probably the result of adrenaline. Probably.

Down in the meadow, he could hear Sir Jorrin ordering the archers to storm the cave. From the sounds of it, the archers were objecting.

Tossing aside the handful of arrows, Colin crawled into the mountain and rose to his knees, breath hissing through his teeth at the movement. Curled up on its hoard, the dragon hissed back.

"They tried to kill me!" he told it, still not quite believing in spite of the punctures. "Really kill me!"

The dragon lowered its wedge-shaped head and regarded him through slitted topaz eyes.

"Sir Jorrin's a bigoted thug, the king makes promises like it's an election year, fairy tale cities stink, and I've got a dozen poisoned arrow holes in my butt." He sighed and shook his head. This last bit was going to need editing before he could share it with Alison. Heavy editing.

"I'm sorry, dragon. I *tried* to save you but nothing's changed. Any day now, some knight, maybe even Sir Jorrin, will challenge you and you'll have to

answer and..."

And all at once, Colin realized that the bits of metal scattered throughout the hoard were actually bits of miniature armor and that lying in the curve of the dragon's emerald green tail was a tiny human skull with the top bitten off. "And you'll eat him," he finished. Somehow, after everything he'd been through, it didn't even surprise him much.

"You never needed my help, did you? You probably think the challenge is a call for dinner." It was definitely time to go home. "Oh well, at least you act in self-defense, which is more than can be said for Sir Jorrin and company."

He remembered the king telling him that he had *encouraged* Sir Jorrin to challenge the dragon.

"Because Sir Jorrin is young and strong and ambitious and deserves a chance to win a dukedom."

"Young, strong, ambitious and stupid. His Majesty probably *encourages* everyone he'd like to get rid of. So much for Camelot." With one last rub of his aching bottom, he shuffled over to the quartz passage and began working his way into the narrow opening, eyes squinted almost shut against the shimmer of light.

It'll be just my luck to get stuck here...

But the rainbows were still dancing, so they should send him home.

The way the day's been going, I'll probably find out this was a side effect from underground testing and I'm going to end up glowing in the dark.

His lower legs were still in the dragon's cave when he heard it slither off its hoard and across the floor. He couldn't stop himself from chuckling as its forked tongue danced over the inside of one ankle and he felt himself relax as the feathery touch continued. Maybe things weren't so bad. *At least I can tell Alison there's a* little *magic left.* He held perfectly still so as not to scare it away and got his reward when a soft, warm nose lightly pressed against his skin.

Then it bit him on the calf.

His head jerked up, slamming painfully into the top of the passage. Whimpering, he scuttled forward, through the moment of vertigo thinking of nothing but getting home. The walls crumbled behind him during the vertical scrabble up the rock chimney but he ignored them as he struggled towards the smell of rotting vegetation wafting down from the forest floor above.

Finally, his head emerged into the shadows of dusk and he managed to drag his body out after it. Without the energy remaining for contortions, he rolled out from under the fallen tree and lay for a moment breathing heavily on a leafy cushion of ground cover.

He began to itch on the way home. He'd been lying in poison ivy.

Alison stared sleepily up at him, a battered teddy bear clutched under one chubby arm. "Why'd you stop him from fighting the dragon, Daddy?"

Colin blinked. And tried not to scratch. "But honey, surely you wouldn't want the dragon to be killed?"

"But that's what knights *do* with dragons." Her voice held the same matter-of-fact protest Sir Jorrin's had.

"Daddy!" Alison called from the kitchen. "Guess what?"

Colin glanced up from his magazine. The poison ivy blisters had nearly healed, the swelling from the arrows had gone down enough so that he could sit comfortably again, and the new medicine had pretty much taken care of the nasty intestinal parasite he'd picked up from drinking that half barrel of water. "What?" he asked, making the effort to sound interested and involved.

"There's a unicorn in the garden eating the tops off the carrots."

A unicorn in the garden. His mouth went dry. Easy to believe she saw a deer, or a goat, but he knew better.

In spite of everything, there *was* still magic in the world. Still wonderful, mystical, mythical things.

His heart began to pound. Ignoring a sharp pain from the scabbed-over dragon bite, he got to his feet and hobbled into the kitchen.

"What ho, magic!" he called softly.

Alison, her nose pressed against the window, watched as the unicorn moved over one row and began eating the lettuce. "What did you say, Daddy?"

Colin smiled down at the back of his daughter's head. "I said, that's nice, dear."

But he said it like he meant it.

Picking up the bottle of calamine lotion, he went back to the living room.

Because it was nice.

Wincing only slightly, he settled back into his chair.

And *this* time, it was going to stay that way.

❄

Tanya Huff lives "just right of the middle of nowhere" in the more general vicinity of Toronto. She is the author of a number of fantasy novels including the four book Vicky/Henry/Celluci vampire/mystery series. **SING THE FOUR QUARTERS** came out from DAW last December and will be followed by two sequels. She says that although she swore that writing full-time would not lead to a "thickening of the spine", somehow the books keep getting longer.

Bob Eggleton, who lives in Rhode Island, is a well-known fantasy and science fiction artist. He won the 1991 Chesley Award for Best Cover Illustration: Magazine and the 1994 Hugo for Best Professional Artist. He's been wanting to do a cover with a dragon on it for us ever since he started working with us, and we finally had the right story.

Artwork by Bob Eggleton

Penelli's Harp

by Katherine Blake

Without intending to, she had come into Moldbar on market day, and the streets were lined with stalls, roofed with lengths of fabric that had been bright red or blue before the sun faded them. And there were lesser vendors who had brought whatever goods they had bundled up in a blanket to be spread out on the cobbles, and little old women from tiny settlements in the Rind who had walked all night to squat here in the sun with a single egg offered for sale on the palm of a skinny hand.

Mathali had found a corner where she could sit and share a cup of milk with her cat, and get her head into the shade of a tall tower, and try to think. Indeed, high time she took thought; for the last two days she had fled along an arc of the Mountain Ring as though hounds were at her heels, but likely she was safe now; Idurus didn't even know yet that she was still alive. Her mind ran over a table of kennings for "hound," most of them fit for describing a man to his discredit, and chose several for use on her brother-in-law.

But though cursing made her feel better, it didn't get her any forwarder, as the country folk said. She had a beltful of gold (most of it now sewn into the hem of her tunic), a change of linen, a short sword, a kitten, and her wits. None would last forever. One day she would take vengeance on Idurus and get her children back, but before she got that far she would have to make her living. The gold might be enough to pay a small army — if she decided that was the way to do it — but not if she paid it all out in living expenses.

Sitting with her head in the shade, watching Captain lap up the last of the milk, she reviewed her choices. She had already decided against going home; her dear father would welcome and protect her, but wouldn't take kindly to her mounting an expedition of vengeance from his comfortable premises. Besides, royal grandchildren made a better boast living in the royal house, not as exiles at home.

She could take up the bard's art again, whose study she had left off when she married Corus. That would probably mean going to the Hall and studying for her baldric, spending some of her gold as an investment in the future. Or she could go to work for a merchant, records-keeping and the like, earning her keep and slowly adding to her savings till she knew how best to use them. She turned the alternatives over in her mind, her eyelids drooping, till her attention wandered and she saw Corus going to the funeral fires, saw her children's stricken faces as she left the room under Idurus's eye.

Her eyes flew open and began to shed tears. Muttering "Damned dust!" she brushed the drops away. No one had ever a better cause to weep than she, but best she not do it under the eyes of strangers. But she must choose, and that soon. And her chances were best here in Moldbar, where merchants were six-a-penny and some of them must be hiring — and where caravans were forming to cut the chord of the Ring to Kelmath and Pittiwigg and the Hall of Bards. Oh, for the days of legend, when the gods would send you a sign and tell you what to do!

And she looked across the street and saw the harp.

It shone dully on the merchant's blanket, in front of the ironing board and behind the seven nested cooking pots from Kiriyan. Mathali's glance must have passed right over it half-a-dozen times without seeing it. It was either an imitation of the Amorgan style from a century ago, or (possibly) real Amorgan and very old indeed. The gold mounts inlaid with bright enamel, the twisted shapes that close up would be the interlaced bodies of animals and men, told her that from where she sat across the street. She got to her feet, tucking the empty cup into her backpack and Captain into the crook of her arm.

The merchant was a cat lover, which gave Mathali a useful entry into the encounter. While the old woman cooed and mewed over Captain, how small he was, how black, even his whiskers the color of ink — Mathali turned over bits of trash and examined the harp.

It was small, standing only as high as her knee, and it was old, all right. The imitation Amorgan work never had the depth of color of the original. Incredibly, it still had all its strings but one,

and they were the sooty black of long-tarnished silver. She tapped the soundboard and it answered like a drum, hale and lively, with a faint ring as all the strings sounded together. She touched one string, and the sound rose through the marketplace chattering like a bright fish through murky water. Many people fell silent, and the merchant looked up. "Try it if ye like," she said.

So Mathali sat and took the harp between her knees and began to tune it. The pegs were still sound. She ran an experimental fingertip across the strings — her nails had been cut short for the funeral, she would have to grow them back — and found the tuning adequate. She played soft chords and runs, working around the missing string, testing her hands and her ears. A melody took shape that went with the chords, and after a while she recognized it.

"I grew within a garden green,
A golden rose was I;
The scarlet rose has pierced my heart
And left me here to die."

Penelli's Lament. A sad song, that, and fitting to her state of mind. But Penelli's lover had played her false, hadn't he, whereas Mathali's had been true until death.

"Oh, maidens all, take heed of me,
Give not your heart away:
For when it's gone from out the breast
It leaves you naught but clay."

If she had wanted a sign from the gods, this was plainly it: a harp no musician could let pass from her hand. Why was it sitting in a petty merchant's pitch between the ironing board and the cooking pots? Did the merchant know its value? How high a price would she insist on? How big an investment in Mathali's future was this going to be? She had a vision of herself, concealed in a privy somewhere, ripping the gold crowns out of her hem that she had just sewn in. She looked up and saw the merchant looking at her, her weathered face gone pale under the tan.

"How much?"

"Two crowns," the merchant said guardedly.

But that was absurd, that was about the price of a good harp of recent make. The merchant should have named her opening price much higher, expecting to be beaten down. There must be something wrong with the harp after all. *Hopes risen high fall back to die.* It would

Artwork by Dameon Willich

do for a practice instrument, at any rate.

The small crowd that gathered to hear the dickering got a disappointment; the merchant and the harpist, who should have been dueling with glee over the pretty thing, beating the price up and down, went through the motions as if neither cared a straw. Within minutes they had clasped hands on a price of ten shields, just under half-a-crown and about what a student's beginner-piece would bring in a decent shop. She took up the harp in one arm and Captain in the other and set off in the direction of the Waste Gate. She glanced back once and saw the merchant rearranging her stock, looking neither downcast nor triumphant — only relieved, as if she had now one less thing to worry about.

Mathali's next purchase was a soft quilt to wrap the harp in, and next a leather strap to carry it by. By then she had reached Harpmakers' Street and spent a shield on a coil of new strings. But her destination was still the Waste Gate, where she found a caravan bound for Kelmath in the morning. She paid a tenth of her passage on the spot, as the custom was; five parts on departure, four on arrival. That left her with the rest of the day to kill. Plans of all kinds ran through her head, but in the end she went back to the inn where she'd taken a room and practiced till nightfall.

Artwork by Dameon Willich

If she'd been listening closely as she played, she might have been forewarned: but she hadn't touched a harp in years and her fingers were still and slow. And her heart was heavy; and the leaden sounds she drew from the silver strings suited her mood. Even when she played "Moonflowers" and what was supposed to be a dance of seduction came out like a funeral march, it didn't tally in her mind. She played lullabies for dead infants, keens for plainfuls of fallen warriors, winter songs, famine songs. And she kept drifting back into "Penelli's Lament."

"O that I had a pair of wings,
With feathers strong and fair,
To bear me from this hateful place
Away into the air."

A knock on the door made her jump. She opened it a cautious thumb's-breadth. But it wasn't an irate innkeeper; it was a young man with a spotty complexion and a cheerful grin and a mug of beer in his hand. "Hey, harper. We've been hearing you through the ceiling. Come downstairs and play for us, and we'll make it worth your while."

Mathali considered this. "Now, I won't deceive you: I'm only recently come back to the trade after years away, and my fingers are still stiff. But I'll do my best for you, and you pay me what you think is fair." (After all, even a few coppers was something gained.)

So she came downstairs, where a dozen young men were celebrating their half-holiday. She played them "Misty Morning" and "Where the Trumpets Blow" and "The Unquiet Grave" and, of course, "Penelli's Lament."

"But since that mercy cannot be,
Nor ever was before,
Oh then may Death come soon to me,
That I may weep no more."

The room was quiet when she finished the song, with one or two of the lads wiping his eyes where he thought his fellows wouldn't see.

But one of them, a big man with the arms of a journeyman smith, looked round the room and said, "This'll never do. Play a tune to dance to, harper." He pushed his neighbor to the opposite

end of their table, and together they began pushing it toward the wall. When a space was cleared, Mathali began a dance called "Tetti's Round," a lively dance for as many as will.

But it came out sounding like a dirge.

"Sorry," she said, and started over. But the sound was slow and mournful, and even when she forced it up to speed it sounded like a dance for ghosts, not men. The big smith was glaring at her. "I cry your pardon," she said. "My fingers are stiffer than I thought." And she drew a deep breath and began,

"Oh clearly I remember,
It was on a sunny day,
The honeywagon came to town
To haul the slops away."

A cheerful song, long and improper, with an appropriate meter for a round brawl. The young men seized the barmaids and drew them into the ring: there were still more men than women, but that didn't matter in a round brawl. During the many verses, each with chorus, Mathali had a chance to lay out the rest of her list. She gave them "Green Willows," a gliding long-dance for partners that gave a few of the boys a chance to flirt with the barmaids and the rest to clown about with each other. Then she sang "Cross-Quarter Day," a fast piece suitable for a spiral dance that left them shorter of breath than she was and ready to buy her as many mugs of ale as she wanted. She only wanted one; she needed to think.

After the second set she went back upstairs, the good ale warm in her innards and her belt heavy with coppers and double-coppers. Nearly a shield and a half. She'd never get rich on such takings, but it was a good omen for things to come.

Before she slept she opened the window shutters and looked out over the square. The late moonlight picked out the corner where the old woman had sat on her blanket with the ironing board and the seven nested cooking pots from Kiriyan and the Amorgan harp. The place was empty now: the merchant had gone her way, probably out of the city, not to be found again before daybreak and the caravan's departure.

Nor was it likely she could have answered Mathali's questions if she'd found her. She'd known she had some unchancy thing, that was certain, and was glad to be rid of it. Probably she knew no more.

Mathali drew the shutters in and fastened them, and made sure her door was well-bolted. There were some who'd cut a throat for a shield and a half, but they wouldn't get in tonight.

The caravan left just after daybreak. Not having a mount of her own, Mathali got her choice of what they had to spare: a surly horse with a cast in its eye, or an equally surly pack camel already piled high with bales of cheap embroidery. She chose the camel, as further off the ground and less likely to spook if its rider started making funny noises. And indeed the camel made no objection to the sound of harp music; it turned its head round to look at her, decided the harp was neither edible nor dangerous, and ignored her thereafter.

The Rind of the Waste was thin and dry in these parts, with more sheep-stations than farms. Here and there a little cluster of trees and huts, a few green garden-patches, marked places where deep wells had been dug to draw water out of bedrock. On the very edge someone had carved out a hopeful assart, a hut and a few fields fenced in with brushwood. He must have dug a new well, Mathali mused, and wondered what it would do to the flow of his neighbors' wells. This far out, maybe nothing.

Captain woke mid-morning, and crawled out of Mathali's pack to groom himself on her lap. He ate bits of meat and cheese and drank water poured from her waterskin into his cup; then she must turn the camel out of the path and stop it so that Captain could alight and irrigate the brush. (But really, for so young a cat he was being very good about spending so much time in her pack. She would have to get him a basket or something.)

All day she practiced, and experimented, and pondered. By the time they reached Vossum's Rocks, their stopping-place for the night, she had decided to believe for the present that the harp was cursed or enchanted, that it would play only sad songs and turn all merry songs into dirges. She could play scales and fingering exercises as fast as she liked, though, so it would do for practice until she could get another harp.

(And get rid of this one? Not unless it turned out to have some other ill effect. The tone was beautiful, and there was a certain market for sad songs. There was a limit to what she could carry, of course. Maybe she'd get a *small* second harp for the merry tunes.) She got down from the kneeling camel, whistling and stretching out her aching limbs. She did not have to unload the camel — a guide did that — but she led it to water and gave it its hay. If she couldn't win its friendship, at least she'd maintain their current armed neutrality.

That night, by a tiny fire of brush and thorn, she sang merry songs for her fellow travelers, and played them sad ones.

"O treacherous is shining ice,
And rotten wood, and mud,
And friends and kin who smile
before
They leave you in your blood.
And woman's heart is falser still,
I say it well who can:
No falser thing's in all the world,
Except the heart of man."

Nobody paid her anything for them; they must think it was all laid on. No matter: it was practice.

The following day, once the sun was up, she took the harp and examined it closely. One version of the story told that Penelli had been an Amorgan. Too much to ask of coincidence, that this should be her own harp — but maybe it wasn't coincidence; maybe it was cause and effect. And by the revealing morning light she could see that here, worked in amongst the foxes and thornflowers at the base, was something that must be writing. Mathali didn't read Amorgan, but presumably it used one of the common scripts of its day, which had all descended from the Kendrian syllabary. Here was certainly an A, and this thing that looked like an R must be a P. She puzzled out several words that meant nothing to her, but the last (still assuming that R was a P) read *Penellas*.

Very well, she would assume for the moment that this was indeed Penelli's own harp, cursed or enchanted by her or for her, that it would play only sad songs. She could live with that. There were sages in the world, not a few of them in the Hall of Bards, who could read the Amorgan script, maybe knew how to disenchant the harp. And if they could — or even if they couldn't, she could sell it if she chose (at a nice profit) to an antiquary, curse and all. So it would all work out. She had reached this stage in her thinking when the bandits attacked.

They were now some twenty miles deep into the Waste, with no living thing to be seen but scrub and brushrats. Nor could the bandits live out here;

they must retreat to a settlement in the Rind between forays. But here they came, their headcloths wrapped round their faces, their swords glinting in the sun.

They were still far off when the caravan turned. The guidemaster on his tall camel rode up and down the line to speed up stragglers. "We are going to shelter in those ruins to our right, the old necropolis. Move it; I say, move it!" he shouted at an elderly merchant who protested. "Shelter with the dead is better than none."

He gave Mathali's camel a switch on the hindquarters as he rode by, and the animal snorted and glared and picked up speed. Slowly the necropolis drew nearer. So did the bandits.

The sun was westering now, and hot on their backs. Mathali's mouth had gone dry, but she didn't reach for the skin that held her water allotment. She might have to make it last a long time.

The guidemaster was taking a risk leading them here, in the hopes the old tombs would give shelter to the pack animals and noncombatants, leaving the armed men free to fight. There might be no shelter. Or it might prove a trap, if the bandits knew the place and could herd them into a corner. But it was the best chance they had.

The camel trotted on, slapping one broad foot after another into the sand. Mathali, sitting perfectly still, felt her heart race as if she were running herself. The mocking cries of the bandits grew louder as they closed in behind. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, as she'd been taught. It was said that in the epics was contained all wisdom, including strategy in war. She couldn't think of any that applied — except the old saw, "When desperate, attack." Maybe the guidemaster was planning to do that, once he'd got the rest of them stowed somewhere.

Four armed horsemen went down the line at a gallop, to round up stragglers perhaps or to guard the rear. The head of the line had reached the ruins.

The pursuing bandits had changed their tune. They were talking to one another in their own harsh tongue, and sounding less enthusiastic, less certain of easy pickings. Mathali turned and looked, peering past the mound of cheap embroidery. Waving their arms, turning to shout at each other, yes, they were falling back. Perhaps they feared the necropolis. That could be good luck or ill — they might know something about it worth fearing.

Mathali's camel stepped over the low line of stones where part of a wall had fallen, and followed its leader between two massive ruined towers into a wide street, big enough to hold market in. What use in a necropolis for such a thing? Funeral processions perhaps? Here was a fountain, long gone dry, its marble basin filled with sand and thick with scrub. Here a shapely arch, its carving worn smooth by wind and sand, opened into a roofless chamber.

The column halted, or Mathali's part of it did. Behind her the last beasts came trotting into the street, one of the armed men bringing up the rear. They were going to shelter here, she realized: the two towers and the narrow breach in the wall gave the guidemaster a bottleneck that his men could defend. Other openings into the street could be blocked with rubble. There, for example, where that leaning roof had crumbled away to reveal a row of public privies —

In a city of the dead?

"Guidemaster," Mathali called out as the man rode down the line again. "This isn't a necropolis: this was a city."

"Yes, harper, I had begun to think so myself. Can you tell what city it was?"

"Not from what I see here. If I get a chance, I'll go and explore."

"Do so, if you like. We shall be here a while." And he rode on. Mathali sig-

Artwork by Dameon Willich

naled her camel to kneel, and it gave her a look of unspeakable disdain and knelt.

Captain yowled, and she opened the pack and let him out. She slung the harp over her shoulder, leaving her pack on the camel. (Anyone who cared to steal a heel of bread and a set of dirty underlinen needed them more than she did.)

Captain was walking, tail high, toward the bank of privies. Finding a drift of sand in a corner, he used it for its original purpose. Now there was an idea — but Mathali would have to wait till they reached a set out of sight of the crowd in the street.

She followed the kitten between the ruined buildings, through narrow back alleys and grand streets, wide enough to hold a triumphal procession in. The soldiers marching to the sound of gongs and drums; the captives shuffling forward in their chains; the men of the city cheering from the sidelines; the veiled women leaning out from latticed windows to throw flowers to their heroes —

Mathali caught herself. No city had put its women in veils, except for Kiriyan of course, for hundreds of years. What had put that image in her mind? Granted, the city was old enough; but any latticed windows had crumbled to powder as the walls eroded to shoulder height — Ha. Privies.

Inside, shielded from the wind's blast, graffiti she couldn't read overlapped one another on the walls. She began looking for other sheltered places.

A bit of carving here. A trace of paint here. An armless, headless statue fallen from its decorated pedestal — Oh, turds. Where was the kitten? "Captain! Mrrow? Kit-kit-kit-kit?"

She heard him answer, faint and far away, and ran toward the sound, leaping fallen walls and plowing through drifts of sand. Her daughter Janli had given him to her, and he was all she had.

She found him climbing, as though he owned it, a broad terrace that rose a few steps at a time to the largest building she had seen yet, and the best preserved. Some of the walls still reached to the second story, and in a far corner a roofless tower rose above all. The royal house, maybe. She lifted Captain to her shoulder and climbed to where the great doors had been. All their figured bronze had long since been stripped away, and their wooden cores lay crumbling in the sand. She stepped over them and went in.

Even with no roof to shut away the sky, it was dark inside. The sun was ready to set, and the copper-colored light poured in through the door. Once her eyes adjusted she could see that the floor was inlaid with mosaics — and then she was on hands and knees, sweeping the sand away with her hands and the tail of her cloak, while Captain stood on her back and purred encouragement.

An interlace that ran from square to square, the Great Chain of Being from stones to plants to beasts to men to gods, all interwoven till it took thought to say whose toes were whose. All in the bright, unfading colors of gold and glass. Amorgan work.

So this was Amorga, then, or one of its colonies — it had had several, in the days when rain fell here and the Waste was a vast green field starred with cities as with flowers. Truly, this was beyond chance. Some fate had brought her here, directing the merchant, the caravan, camel and Captain and bandits alike, to bring her here to Penelli's city with Penelli's harp.

Slowly she got up, giving Captain time to climb to her shoulder again. Slowly she unwrapped the harp, and carried it in her arms through the shadowed rooms, looking for a sign. Maybe, when she had brought the harp back where it belonged, they would let her go.

Another fallen door, a layer of windblown sand filling in the crevices where rich carving had been. A curving staircase, all its steps in place. She tested the first with her foot, and with her whole weight, and it held. The wood was sound, even the bronze fittings bright and in place. The stair was enchanted; here she must go. Captain hunched close to her neck as she climbed, his back bristling, his eyes staring greenly into the shadows. Whatever he saw was invisible to Mathali.

But she went on climbing, and a light began to seep down from above; not the red light of sunset but a golden light, more golden than midday, richer and sweeter than remembered summers. Here was the top of the stair, and the door still hanging; it opened as she reached to touch it. Here was a chamber hung with tapestries, and a silken curtain veiling the single window, and the rich Amorgan ornament painted on the roof-beams. But she had seen that the tower was roofless; this was all illusion and enchantment. Surely she was doomed. Maybe the stairs had already crumbled; maybe she was lying at their feet, dead already, and didn't know it.

Captain hissed and spat. "Hush," she whispered, lifting him from her shoulder, and put him inside her tunic. There was a little bench beside her, and she sat on it and set the harp on her knee.

"My foolish heart, that flew to him
On wings of my desire:
When once he had it in his hand,
He dropped into the mire.
The scarlet rose, all brazen bold
For all the world to see,
Crept down the wall and twined around
And stole my love from me."

There was another sitting in the room, two others; she could not see them, but then she never could see the audience when she was singing.

"Now fare you well, you scarlet rose,
Whom once I loved so well,
And shining halls, and glowing hearth,
And garden green, farewell.
And fare you well, you city streets,
And folk in fine array,
And little houses, little shops,
And children hard at play!"

A man and a woman, sitting together on a wide chair, made for two who were very friendly. She could see them if she didn't look, as certain faint stars can be seen only out of the corner of the eye. His arm was around her shoulders; her hand was on his knee.

"O curse the day I saw him first,
The garden, and the grass,
My chamber, and my window small
By which I saw him pass!
Let brush and thorn possess it all,
No respite let them see
Till scarlet rose and gold entwine,
And that shall never be."

It wasn't like that at all.

Wasn't it?

The bench was longer than she had thought, and someone was sitting beside her. A pale, young face, a wealth of golden hair pulled tightly back into a long tail and bound with pearls; all under a silky veil that trapped the golden light like a cloud in the late afternoon.

Before the gods, Meira, I never knew. The voice was scarcely a whisper, but the meaning was clear.

Nor did I, till it was too late. Be at peace,

Kennerick, it wasn't your fault. Penella, you would never have been happy with him if he had married you. You would have had to go out of the house, to the forum or the fields or the hunt, if ever you wanted to see him. Do you remember, Kennerick, where and how you first caught sight of me?

Do I not? We were hunting the deer in the groves of Elaya, and your horse shied and you were hanging on hand and foot, red-faced and laughing. You'd lost your veil, and your father was not best pleased, but I knew then I'd come to Amorga for better reasons than affairs of state.

And our marriage was true. Did you think, Penella, that you would divide us, when you bound me here? No: Kennerick has remained here all these centuries, for love of me.

The shape beside Mathali bowed its head. In the silence voices sounded far below, a sentry's challenge and response.

Just as his men remained, for love of him. And greatly did he inspire love, Penella, but you could have had a brother's love and a husband of your own, if you had condescended to go on living with us.

"Did she die of a broken heart?" Mathali whispered.

Artwork by Dameon Willich

Oh, don't be a fool, harper, Meira snapped. *She took poison and bound her curse upon me with her last breath. But every binding must have its release. Since she didn't specify one, that last line of her song — 'till scarlet rose and gold entwine' — bound her too, until the release should come.*

Penella, Kennerick said gently, *we can forgive you, if you can forgive us. Come.*

And Penella rose like a wave and moved across the floor like a sunbeam, to fall into her sister's lap and be twined in her arms. Kennerick's hand rested upon her hair. The golden light began to fade. "May I go now?"

What? Oh, yes, harper. Go safely, with our thanks. What chance brought you here?

"No chance, I think, but fate. The proximate cause was a troop of bandits that drove us here for shelter. They're laying siege to us now."

Before Amorga's very gates! The insolence! Kennerick, call up your men. We'll drive those rabble away; and then we can go home.

The light went out like a snuffed candle, and a hot wind blew up and blotted out the stars. "Wait —" Mathali began, but her mouth filled with sand and bench and floor fell away beneath her and the wind picked her up and whirled her away.

Something silken fell across her face, keeping off the hard-blown sand. After a moment she ventured to open her eyes. She was flying, like a shadow in a dream, over the roofless ruins of Amorga. Around her moved the shapes of armed men, a mighty army in the tunics and bronze cuirasses of the old days, the plumes of their helmets whipping wildly in the airstream. Before them soared their well-loved commander, Kennerick armed cap-a-pie, with a lady on each arm. Like hellriders they wailed, veils cast aside, long hair streaming, their hands crooked like claws. It was enough to frighten any bandit into instant disgrace. They swooped down along the crumbled walls, where travelers huddled among their indignant camels and where bandits strove to mount horses that were already running away in panic. Mathali landed, with a thump, in a drift of sand at the foot of a tower.

She tried taking a breath, and when that worked, she made her arms and legs unclench. She was still holding the harp, and under it Captain, yowling and squirming under her fingers. On her third attempt she got to her feet,

and made her way back to the street and her companions.

The guidemaster rode back through the breach, leading by the reins a pale desert pony, its flanks still shuddering, its eyes rolling with fear. "Pitti's balls, harper," he said. "Did you have anything to do with that?"

"Well, yes, I might have," Mathali admitted. "I seem to have stirred up something."

"Hmph. Then we won't wait for its return. Mount up!" he bellowed. "We ride *now*. We'll make Kinda's Springs by midnight and drink and eat before we sleep. Move it!" and turning back to Mathali, he handed her the pony's reins. "Here," he said. "If you can ride her, she's yours."

It took perhaps a quarter of an hour for the caravan to form up again, and it took fully that long for Mathali to calm the pony enough to be ridden. She loaded her pack behind the saddle, and her waterskin, and commended the camel with the cheap embroidery to whatever gods it might deign to associate with. Captain, asleep inside her tunic, she left where he was. She played a chorus of "The Day the Honeywagon Caught Fire" just by way of a test. It sounded fine: a merry tune, fit to dance to. She wrapped the harp up again and took her place in line.

She would have to change the ending, before she sang that song again.

"Till scarlet rose and gold entwine,
And (something) sets us free —"

As the pony stepped through the breach in the walls, the starlight fell on something that shone on her shoulder — the fragments of a silken veil. As she lifted them they melted and vanished like new-fallen snow, and the wind blew free between her fingers.

❄

Katherine Blake would be your typical little old Berkeley lady in Birkenstocks except that she is not at all politically correct. At her age she doesn't feel the need to be. She lives in a small house well-stocked with cats and illusions, and drinks lots of tea. Her first novel, **THE INTERIOR LIFE**, came out in 1990 and went right back in again, leaving scarcely a ripple to mark its passage. She is now at work on another novel that she hopes will be "cyber but not punk."

Dameon Willich lives in Seattle and has been active in the Northern Lights artists' group. He has a lifelong interest in horsemanship and armor.

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Go with me, like good angels, to my end;
And as the long divorce of steel falls on me,
Make of your prayers one sweet sacrifice,
And lift my soul to heaven
— Shakespeare (*Henry VIII*)

If Nain Cinchon had not been a fence, he would not have had so many problems. If he had not been a fence in the Spring, he would still be alive.

Rimmon, first city of the Alarine Empire, was rich enough to abandon an unwanted part of itself to those it did not wish to see. The Edge was the district in Rimmon which lay between the barrio (Rimmon Old City) and the river Abbana — not a desirable address, though in Spring the Edge was at its best. In Spring the ice was gone from the river and the rains had come to fill it; Abbana flowed fast and the garbage thrown into her was swept quickly away. The Summer's heat (which would become oppressive soon) was not yet great, and ice (should anyone want it when the memory of Winter was still fierce) was still available for sale at reasonable prices.

Ice entered into Nain Cinchon's business, if only slightly.

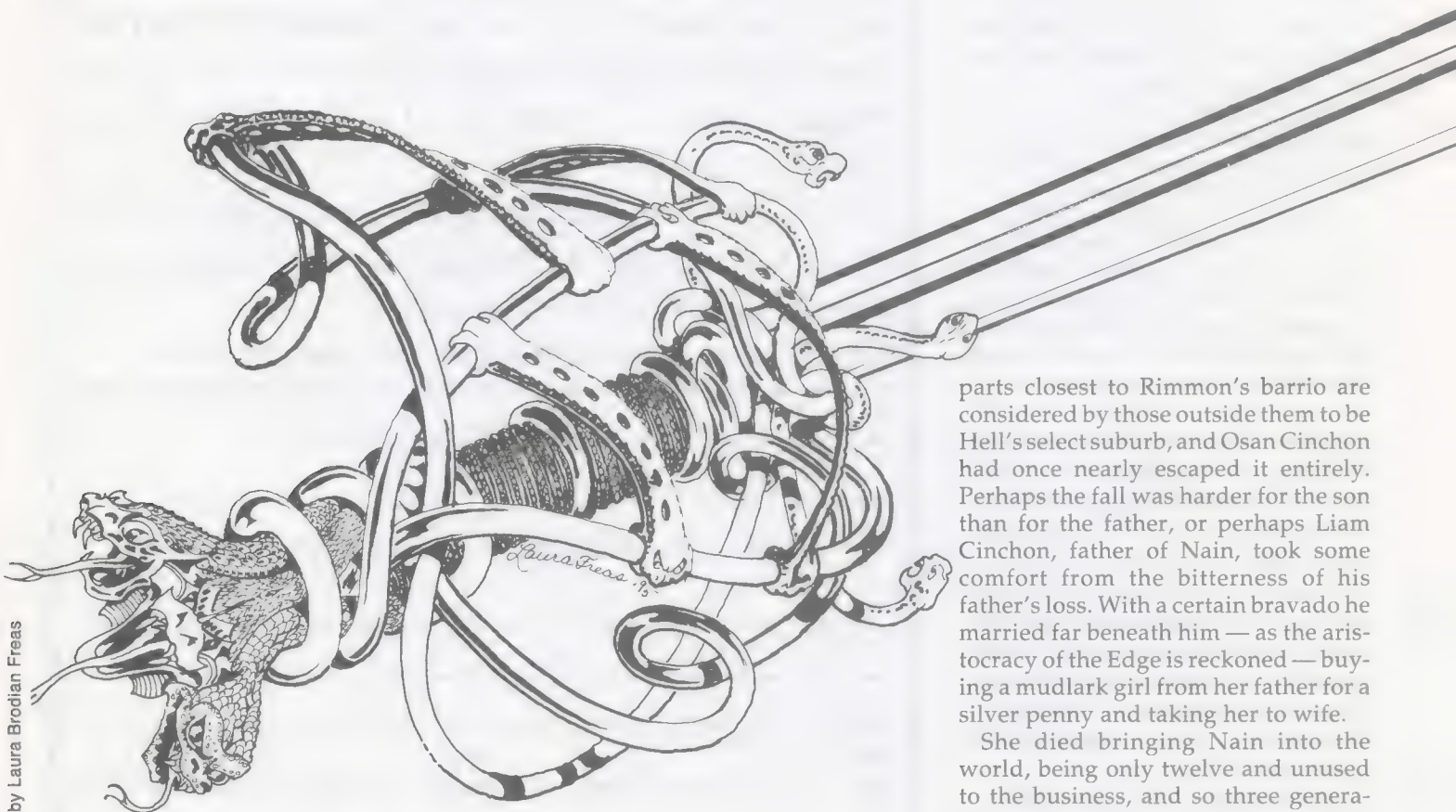
The signboard over the shop in the building that Nain owned (as had his father and grandfather before him) was the effigy of a high-topped boot. Between the time the nobility had deserted it, and the time it became as it now was, the Edge had hosted brief mercantile glories — until the trades had followed the professions on an unending climb toward sunlight and the free air. Now there was a middle class of buyers and purveyors; like pondslick, a buffer between air and water, they occupied the debatable edges of gentility, providing an overture to the politics of need before the Edge was reached.

The only shops left inside the barrio catered to Edgefolk, their common needs (uniquely supplied) and their native perception of right and value and fair dealing.

The Cinchons had always "come from" the Edge, in the sense that it was a place they had always been in the process of leaving. They had been rich once (as the Edge reckoned wealth), and in those days the building behind the sign had (perhaps) been leased to a cobbler. Then richness departed, the properties owned and stolen and extorted in the migration toward the light vanished one by one (an inevitable result of the end of Osan Cinchon's business of supplying young Edgefolk to an exclusive establishment in Upper Rimmon) and in the end Nain Cinchon first opened his eyes to the light of day as it entered through a window half-blocked by a wooden boot. In the shop on the first floor, Nain's father, following Osan Cinchon's profession on a more elemental level, sold meat to those in the Edge who could afford such a luxury.

The place was not quite in the worst quarter of the district — though no place there is very good — but even the parts closest to Rimmon's barrio are considered by those outside them to be Hell's select suburb, and Osan Cinchon had once nearly escaped it entirely. Perhaps the fall was harder for the son than for the father, or perhaps Liam Cinchon, father of Nain, took some comfort from the bitterness of his father's loss. With a certain bravado he married far beneath him — as the aristocracy of the Edge is reckoned — buying a mudlark girl from her father for a silver penny and taking her to wife.

She died bringing Nain into the world, being only twelve and unused to the business, and so three generations of Cinchons dwelt for a time beneath the sign of the boot, and Liam sold meat.



Artwork by Laura Brodian Freas

The Long Divorce of Steel

by eluki bes shahar

He was not over-nice as to the ownership of the goods he accepted in payment, and so it was that Nain was a second- (or third-, it might be) generation receiver of stolen goods.

Nain's father had done well in the business and so did Nain, but the habit of poverty, learned in his grandfather's time, cut deep: the Family Cinchon had learned circumspection, and never again thought of expanding its holdings beyond the butcher's shop.

And Nain, despite his other successes, really did sell meat. Perhaps it was the fulfillment of cheating people. Perhaps he thought it was necessary to safeguard his less-than-legal avocation.

On second thought, it must have been the joy of cheating. That was, after all, why he wanted the ice.

Ice was necessary to that aspect of Nain's business that was conducted in the open light of day — at least it was once Winter was over. In Winter all the Summer delicacies of Rim-mon's nobility were available to any Edgewalker — meat and milk and eggs that did not penny a packet, three packets for a penny) to hide the bread and offal that had been added, no cat ever complained, or died of eating it.

But before the fleshmonger's spoiled wares reached that stage in their evolution, many of them came to Nain Cinchon and his ice.

At his father's knee Nain Cinchon had learned that meat soaked overnight in iced brine to conceal the taint and then washed in iced honey-water to remove the salt could be sold (to the optimistic, the desperate, and the indifferent) as good fresh meat at a silver penny the pound — or traded for things worth much more if they had been honestly come by.

If Nain had put this much effort into the actuality of his daylight business he would have been a success. But he was not, at heart, a fleshmonger. Nain was a trader in flesh.

So on this particular Spring day, Nain The canted buildings obscured the light; the twists in the narrow streets baffled sight. One walked in gloom; one's choice of situation was between the slippery pavement where one might be doused with washing-water and worse, and the center of the street with its sluggish, iridescent gutter. Neither gave one much chance of seeing fellow pedestrians before being seen.

"Cinchon! Master Cinchon! I — I got something for you!"

The voice was familiar, but Nain walked faster.

A man who traffics in valuables obtained by violence — and who lives daily lessoned in the object of violence — is necessarily a coward. Outside his proper place — the small back room of the shop whose ostensible purpose is otherwise — he does not wish to meet those from whom he obtains his living; Nain had a lot of company. *Nobody* wanted to meet Hake.

Hake had run girls and books and drugs, and escaped all his enemies by willing to be lower than they. Perhaps Hake was comforted by the knowledge that there was always somewhere lower that he could reach. It gave him scope — a sweep of field undreamed of by anyone else of his time. If Nain became Alarine Emperor tomorrow, he would not have spanned more levels of society than Hake. But Hake's path lay ever downward, and man's tropism is for the heights.

So Nain walked faster, armored in disinterest. Eventually he didn't hear Hake any longer.

The icehouse was on the river Abbana itself, and its wares were the slabs and chunks and chips sawn from the surface of the river in winter. Its traffic with higher Rimmon was year-round, except for those nobles who, flaunting their wealth and connections, summoned ice from their country estates

instead. Each week from the week it opened its doors the price of ice rose, and the list of buyers who could afford it dwindled, until — around early fall — the ice and the buyers both vanished, to reappear the following spring when ice, once more, was nowhere else to be obtained. Nain Cinchon transacted his business, and told over in his mind the reckoning of how much longer it would be profitable to doctor his tainted meat with ice, and returned home to finish out his working day.

As we have heard before, Nain Cinchon was a coward. And since it is a very brave, or innocent, or very famous man indeed who ventures anywhere in the Edge at night, Nain's other business was also transacted during the day. In fact, if not for the delivery of ice, he would never have opened his doors after dark at all.

But he *had* ordered ice, and he *did* open his door, and there were the drayman and his pony-cart, and the dangerous men who stood about, doing no more work than ensuring peace on the street while the carter and his boy hauled and grunted. The torch Nain had lit before his door glittered off the ice swaddled in sawdust and leather, and quickly the hundred pounds of winter he had ordered was stowed, safe, in the meat-safe at the back of his house. Then the cart moved on, and Nain Cinchon quenched his torch and barred his outer door again, and went back inside.

He had just sat down at the table of his inner room and pulled his ledger toward him to tell over his accounts once more, when Hake stepped into the charmed circle of candlelight, bringing the smell of the river with him.

"Ah, Master Cinchon," he said happily. "I was wanting to see you." He shrugged his cloak aside and hefted what he held concealed beneath it, and as Nain Cinchon's heart hammered, Hake laid his bundle gently on the table and reverently unwrapped it.

It was a sword.

Many years ago, from the same southern city as came delicate and expensive glasses of unmelting ice, came something even sharper and more fatal.

A new style.

Not of clothing or painting or politics — dangerous enough to import — but of sinew and salt-sweat and steel. The true art of fence came to Rimmon from Boutrimei, and now men could butcher one another with whips of steel as supple and eloquent as tongues. The old swords, sturdy and inflexible and gray, went to treasure-vaults and trophy-rooms and ironmongers, and Boutrimen swords and Boutrimen style were worth everywhere their weight in diamonds.

This was not a Boutrimen blade.

Nain's grandfather might have called it thin. The blade was hammered into a faint curve that made it look shorter than it was. The basket-hilt was grotesque; heavy enough to stop a direct cut. It was brass; the remains of gold showed in patches of mellow pale gilding. Each writhing snake in the design of the nest of snakes had once held a jewel in its mouth. Only three were left: a chalky turquoise, a dull pearl, and a bubbled piece of black glass.

"Why are you bringing me this...." Words failed Nain. He shoved the blade across the table. It struck the floor with a mellow sound, like the after-echo of a church bell.

Hake scrabbled after it, crooning to it in a way that made Nain remember how terribly unsafe Hake was.

"If you knew what this was, Master Cinchon, you wouldn't a-go of doing that. This is a *duelist's* blade. A *legend*." Hake cuddled the sword to him like an etiolated steel doll and gazed truculently at Nain.

"A piece of junk," Nain said.

"But look here, this hilt —"

"Is brass, not gold."

Nain felt safe with the table between them and his bludgeon near his hand, and good hard coin on deposit with someone better unmentioned to ensure that whoever killed Nain Cinchon died hard. The tale was known all over the Edge, and for once in Nain's existence was no trick; the money was as much as he said and where he said it was. Anything less would be stupidity.

Artwork by Laura Brodian Freas

"Don't waste my time, Hake. An ironmonger might give you a copper or two for it."

"But he'd *melt* it!" Hake's face was open as a child's; his affront plain and his unsanity patent. "I wouldn't of brought it to you if I hadn't thought you were a man as knows a good thing — there's people as would give their weight in gold to lay hands on this blade."

Nain ignored all this, concentrating on the salient fact: Hake would not go away until he had been coaxed to it.

"And what do you think I'd give?" Carefully Nain opened familiar negotiations. He looked back at the sword on the table between them. The blade itself was in fair condition; the fittings of a later date. He wondered idly where it had been before it fell into Hake's hands, and cursed his luck that Hake, moved by friendship or malice, had brought it to him instead of the dozen others of his profession that plied their trade in the Edge.

"Well, at least — I went to a lot of trouble to lay hands on this, Master Cinchon, a *lot* —"

"Hake." Now the impatience could show; the world-weariness; the small exasperation of a busy important man.

"Ten silver angels, Master Cinchon." A pause. "Five?"

Five angels. Well, the pearl and the turquoise alone might be worth that; doctor the pearl with hot oil and the turquoise with an indigo bath, set them and sell them to the whores of the Edge as trinkets from a noble's table. Nain's mood lightened. He could buy the piece in good conscience. And then perhaps, Hake would go away.

"Two," said Nain, and bought his death.

And a sword once known as Haut-Clare.

The business was settled at three angels and a cup of snow-brandy. Hake was doing sugar and drink was the only alleviation, and besides, it was the gentle custom of receivers of expropriated property to seal the transaction in liquor to secure repeated calls upon their services. Thus matters were accomplished in the approved style, and then Hake took his unsettling night-fog presence away and Nain was left with the sword.

Useless thing. A duelist's weapon, Hake had said, but the people who sold to Nain would say anything to get him to buy. Too heavy for dress, too clumsy for dueling; truly a weapon that could be all things to all men. Nain locked the door and got his jeweler's tools. The basket-hilt was a later addition, just as he'd thought, and soon the pearl and the turquoise were soaking in small glazed cups. The glass Nain left where it was.

So love came to the cheat, the miser, the receiver of stolen goods — the love of something both more and less than woman with flesh more unyielding than gold. Spring progressed; the supply of affordable ice ceased; Nain's goods dwindled to the salty and suspect sausages that hung in his window, the pounded sheets of dried beef, the pick of the flesh discarded from the city market with a day or two of possible edibility left to it.

And the Edge gained in power-to-alarm and general offensiveness. The river, nourished on the waste of an entire city, slowed and stank. The days of long sunlight baked the smells out of old timbers and let them stand in the air; sunlight softened the old houses until they seemed to lean more acutely each day. The piles of refuse in the twisting streets distilled the liquor of their own vileness, sliding, in the end, puddinglike into their several separate gutters to add their septic richness to the river. The streets were full, too, of Edgefolk seemingly spawned out of offal by sunlight; a generation of mice that would vanish again, namelessly, with the Winter.

The nobles, the dilettantes, the bored who sought the Edge in other seasons vanished in High Summer. Other hells became fashionable; hells that smelled better and carried less threat of disease.

Once again there was talk in Council of burning the Edge for safety's sake. Once again a few houses on its periphery fell to the random and unilateral torch. Once again the matter was deferred until a more propitious moment that would never come.

Nain Cinchon's other business flourished in the heat.

Summer was a time for parties, for lovers' assignations, for barge-trips upon the river, each of which showered its golden benison upon the clever. Summer was a time for people to come to Nain when the morning fog still clung to the streets, to buy and sell and trade and distill gold to his thousand separate safe-places.

But for once the gold wasn't staying there.

It began innocently. The turquoise and the pearl, reset, had sold for six angels — three angels' clear profit on the transaction. Emboldened, Nain had turned all the cleverness he possessed upon the agreeable puzzle of how to make the blade show a profit as well.

The ironmonger he rejected out of hand. The pittance he would receive for the steel and brass was hardly compensation for the opprobrium he would endure in the transaction. Nain hung the antique blade over the blocked fireplace in his bedroom, and by his half-inch allotment of nighttime candle he saw it shine (to the best of its ability) against the sooty plaster, a mild arc of gold and silver. In the night he dreamed of a woman with hair of a shade between white and black, with eyes the color of cinders and sorrow.

Four weeks after he had bought it Nain took the sword, wrapped in a blanket, to a goldsmith in Old City whom he favored. For the price of the gold, and some silver to cover the labor, the grotesque hilt was regilded and the long blade properly polished and oiled.

And she danced on the bloody sand of an arena long since gone to ruin —

The improvement satisfied Nain for ten days together before he took a tracing of the blade to a leathermonger so a sheath could be made.

Danced when the world was new, edged and deadly —

What he got back was of bleached white doeskin, stiffened with whalebone, capped and pointed with gilded brass and stamped, in a baroque pattern, with leaf gold. Rings had been set into its furnishings so that chains (absent yet) could attach it to the dress of its wearer, and for the first time Nain began to think of the sword as something that might be worn.

And in the night the woman danced for him, and the arena crowds shouted her name —

Thus caparisoned, he set the sword again above the mantelpiece, and through the short summer darknesses he bent his mind upon its slender loveliness, until in his dreams he slowly became the sort of man who should carry the sort of sword it was becoming.

Clare

It was wholly and forever now a

sword, in Nain's mind, and — beguiling madness — a sword that might be *used*.

Clare-clare-clare

The men who fought for coin or law, with the hand of Justice seen in the outcome of each match, were the elite of the Edge. In higher Rimmon these figures of romance might never impinge upon one's life; one might despise them, or call them dull, unfashionable, a thousand other derogations.

Haut-Clare

But in the tiny otherworld of the Edge the professional duelists — the steel specialists who enforced the foolish honor of the nobility — were ever-present and uncrowned kings, ruling those Edgefolk they met through a combination of respect and self-preservation.

Nain hated duelists. An exploited accident of physical grace was traded upon, and thus they were enabled to kill — cleanly and elegantly, at no hardship to themselves — and feted for it. There was no cleverness to that.

Yet they were deferred to, and the suspicion that someone was performing a cheat greater than his own was what truly infuriated Nain. A duelist's life, by Nain's understanding, was built upon a lie endorsed and made true by all around him. The duelist was not clever — yet they extolled his cleverness. He was not brave — yet they lauded his bravery. His willingness to kill was held forth as a thing legendary — yet this legend was thick upon the ground in the Edge. In short, duelists coined the gold of social acceptance out of thin air; the same gold that — as lavishly coined and spent — would have set Osan Cinchon high in Rimmon society among fresh victims.

Duelists proved a thing possible that Nain Cinchon's whole comfort was predicated upon knowing impossible. If no one is saved, then there can be no envy among the damned.

Thus Nain, sliding through the shadows of the Edge, wary of its elite. Thus Nain, his mind bent upon a perfect and democratic justice from which there were no exemptions. Thus Nain, despising duelists and petty bravos with clockwork exactitude, beginning to suspect that adjustment lay within his power. Thus Nain, in thrall to magic in a time that believed that magic was gone from the world.

And so had no defense against it when it returned.

High Summer. Everyone else with somewhere else to go had gone there. Smoke and haze hung over the city like a brass shield, and in the Edge the killing could be had for free.

There was no use saying that each day brought Autumn and comfort closer. Autumn was only a prelude to Winter, the bait-and-switch to raise hopes before unveiling a new disappointment. Winter killed more cruelly than tempers ravelled in Summer's heat and spent longer over its prey. And Spring, from Summer, was very far away.

Some who were masters of the sword traveled with their patrons. Some closeted with their lovers. And some, restless, prowled the cavern-oven streets with leopard grace, flaunting themselves before vengeful eyes.

Nain's eyes.

Vengeance and love together inspired him as he gazed at his gleaming lady-love across the width of this bedchamber. It was no longer possible to see her as scrap or spoil. Adrift from her proper time and place, still she was a sword. A sword from legend.

Artwork by Laura Brodian Freas

A sword to kill a swordsman.

Simple enough, that idea. Plausible in execution — few professionals plied their trade past their fortieth year; most died by the blade. Swords killed sword-wielders daily.

But it was Nain's sword, his deadly lady, that Nain wished to kill with, and Nain was no swordmaster, nor could ever become one.

The sword must do the killing alone.

The problem was plain, and there was no peace to be had without its resolution. Nain closed his shutters and barred his door and sat in the stifling darkness of his room, burning candles and drinking brandy. And meditating upon his sword.

Nain's generation did not believe in sorcery, and even alchemy (useless for his purposes) was a hotly-disputed art. No necrophobic ghost could be reliably summoned to inhabit Nain's sword; no curse could be laid upon it. A paradox: he could not kill, though he must, and had no ally, save the sword. Which must then kill where Nain could not.

Living in the Edge taught pragmatism while it scoured away all the customary virtues: there was a way, though the price was high — his sanity, and one thing more.

And at last Nain Cinchon (inheritor of three generations of vicious inventive intelligence) discovered the way and approved it, but it was full Winter when the cheat and the trader in flesh found the last of what he needed.

In Autumn they come to Rimmon. Inevitably they come first to Rimmon Low City, where the first shocks of squalor and sophistication are meted out. Some die, some make their peace and settle there; one in a thousand goes home again. But some do none of these: even Low City drives them out, having first fattened them on a tale of a refuge situated halfway between Paradise and Hell.

Those so fated come a little before the first snow, running heedless before the Watch or walking quick and fearful, like fawns, into the dark warren of old houses and peculiar institutions. If they live until Spring — the trulls, the coiners, the young murderers — the Edge claims them and stamps them with her mark: the Children of Peace. If they live longer, they will have their chance to make legends out of the raw stuff of their own lives.

But Spring is the time for legends. In deep Winter, jaded Rimmon looks for what it has tasted before; duelists, assassins, articulate players of flesh. In Spring the rumors crafted in winter spiral up Society's ladder: new talents for sale, new bodies for show. Rimmon's nobility survives, in part, on its ability to shock itself — or at least, to amuse. And so in Spring the newest Edgefolk are summoned to salon and drawing room, there to be tried and tasted and passed judgment upon.

But first comes Winter.

Winter in the Edge is about the economics of scarcity; about the universe as defined by a lack of certain basic things; about Man, suited for a habitat as ruler of all things, re-suited for an existence as prey. Winter in the Edge is about living just long enough to be able to live longer.

His name was Vere. As in Vere-just and Vere-only and Vere-don't-ask-me. He had red hair and the palest of green eyes and a loose-limbed ought-to-be-awkwardness that the connoisseurs of form compared to stylish murderers of forgotten years. He had come with a sword, he had come for murder, he had come with five gold double-angels (stolen from him his first two hours in the Edge), a hole in his shoe, and a heart full of opportunistic despair.

He was handsome, he was wide-eyed: the Sisterhood took him to its various well-tenanted hearts as soon as he was offered to view — which was how he came by the copper for a seat by the fire at Black Donzel's. A woman named Merrow had explained the procedure for transforming his silver earring into beer, and thus Vere was sitting there when his robber of the previous evening appeared.

Of course it had been, to some extent, arranged. A little judicious tale-bearing, a threat, some calumny. But one could only hope for it to end as it did, with Vere-don't-ask-me (not calling himself a duelist yet) kneeling in the snow outside the door, going through the clothes of the dead man, unimpressed by what was (after all) very little blood, with Black Donzel herself vowing and swearing vengeance upon the disturber until mollified (at Merrow's direction) by gold enough for Vere-just to drink through the winter and buy a round for his particular friends on occasion.

He had been new and his form unknown. The betting against him was heavier than it came to be later. His reach was deceptively long and he showed some taste for fighting with a second blade. He was smart enough to go home with Merrow that night, and gracious enough to kill her pimp for her, which had been the other thing she wanted.

He might make her fortune for her, but the soft living and the commissions would come with the Spring, if they came, and this was Winter. So Vere-only did small jobs for the friends Merrow thought it was good for him to have, and drank and gambled and shivered like the rest of the Edge. And like many Edgefolk, who he had been before was never spoken of again.

But he was not yet an Edgewalker, quite.

Young bravos — hopeful duelists — are touchy. They have to be — not for honor, a sometime thing in the Edge, but for reputation, which in the Spring becomes gold and silver angels out of Rimmon High City. Vere Just (so Merrow had named him) could not afford to ignore the stranger who came to Donzel's.

He had noticed the stranger the moment he came through the door — at the moment, to be precise, when the stranger removed the dull frieze cloak, draggled and spotted, to reveal himself in the uncertain firelight as a noble lord of Rimmon at the very least. He wore a shirt as bright and white as country snow, velvet red as slaughter, silk bright as glass. And at his right hand, a pomander of jewels — which Vere identified, with some incredulity, as the hilt of a sword.

The man stepped down into the room. Donzel's regulars, disturbed, eddied around him, but their murmuration did not hold quite the panic that the advent of a noble lord would bring. Vere looked closer, and saw that for all his freakish and suicidal dress, here was a thin, knobby, clerk-stooped fellow with no style to him: fog-pale, sallow, and underfed, with the indefinable stamp of the Edge on him.

So he was one of that baffling company to which Vere aspired, and so Vere would have dismissed him entirely, save for the sword he carried — though Vere had not seen it clearly yet.

In the Edge, to carry a sword meant you took yourself seriously, and others, for their health, must do the same. It was an old sword, and looked well-

Artwork by Laura Brodian Freas

tended; the jewelled basket-hilt was a writhing gilded nest of snakes. Its owner strode through the room and stopped before the table where Vere Just, long legs childishly sprawled, sat drinking.

"You," the stranger said. "Fellow. I don't *like* you."

He stared at Vere through river-gray eyes and ran his free hand through his mouse-colored hair. His unfree hand was busy on the pommel of his sword, telling over the jewelled mouths of snakes.

"Don't like me then," said Vere. He smiled, though warily, and tried to calculate what money those jewels represented, and gave it up — along with the puzzle of what idiot would carry his wealth in such a manner.

"I don't *like* you," the stranger repeated plaintively. He smelt strongly of civet and moth-herbs, and sweat dampened his lank hair. "You!"

"I hear you," said Vere. "Am I supposed to, ah, *care* particularly for your feelings?" He could not imagine where this would lead — little fame was to be gained, as yet, by challenging Vere Just.

But the stranger was determined. His face was a mask of anguish, his jewelled hands shook with palsy, but he grappled up Vere's half-full mug and flung its contents into Vere's face.

"I don't —" he had begun again when Vere kicked the table over.

Young duelists are touchy. They have to be.

Someone might have warned him, if he were truly an Edgewalker. Merrow would have stopped him, but Merrow was not there, and anyone else who might have explained Vere shrugged off, drunk with a promise of steel. They all knew who Vere's challenger was by now, and the tale spread, bringing more witnesses, in the scant handful of minutes it took draw a circle outside in the rutted and refrozen snow.

Vere closed his mind and his ears to the murmur of betting in the crowd around him, and stood in the cold and wet waiting for the madman with the antique sword to come to him.

He saw it unsheathed with a peculiar occlusion of the heart. It was longer than his own blade, and trickishly curved, and something about the satiny glow of torchlight on the satin steel made Vere hungry for a woman — as if womanflesh had become all bright danger and bloodletting in the night.

He would take the sword when the nameless man was dead. It was his right. He knew that much. And this prize he would keep.

Now that Vere was committed his anger was gone. He was not entirely foolish. It occurred to him that someone so thoroughly reckless might have some reason to be. The madman's sword might well chop right through Vere's own; it was heavy enough, his practiced eye told him (even in the torchlight). If it were also as fast, or faster....

He saluted his opponent, flashing his blade in the torchlight as he had seen others do.

"Well, then, sir, what will you have of me?" he asked, his voice pleasantly low, his strong teeth white. "A dance? I'll step a figure with you."

His opponent, a gray and sweating automaton, raised his own slow blade in parody of Vere's quick salute. He said nothing, almost as if he were afraid. And then he charged, long sword waving.

At first Vere thought this must be some refinement of technique unsuspected by him, however much it appeared to be no technique at all. But within the first minute, even as he still backed around the circle of witnesses,

he came to realize that this gaudy novice had never held a sword before.

It took him four minutes more, playing the stranger absentmindedly, to believe this truth that his body told him. Then, feeling he had in some respect been made a fool of, Vere pinked his foe first upon both arms to show the depth of his displeasure and the height of his ability, and then, when the other's sword lay in the slush, dispatched his victim to death with a certain surgical bravura — cut and cut and cut again while his bloody target spun round and round like a tilting-ring at a fair.

It was not a fight he would have chosen. The man was harmless, but by the time Vere discovered that, he had been beguiled down the fair path of appearances. Gold and velvet and steel had made him take his assailant seriously, and now it was too late to change his mind.

Then his nameless victim fell, and Vere's hot blood cooled to bewilderment in the face of so much other blood. In the Edge, especially, life was sweet. Vere was not yet sophisticated enough to understand the expedient suicide.

His hand closed around the stranger blade, and the roar of a distant arena came to his ears.

Baffled, he stood over the dying man. "Who *are* you?" Vere Just asked.

"I am Nain Cinchon," his victim articulated carefully, "and I am dead."

Already those on the fringes of the fight were slipping away, to bear the news to one better left unnamed that Nain Cinchon was dead. And Nain's gold, masterless now, would keep its promise that his killer would die hard.

The blood rushed up in Nain's throat, and then spilled as his head lolled. And the man Nain had killed stood over him, holding his death and not understanding.

❄

ELUKI BES SHAHAR has written a number of stories set, like this one, in Crownland ("Queeneyes" and "Haut-Clare" were previously published here); she hopes to write a longer Crownland piece some day. She has several sf novels out, including **HELLFLOWER** and **DARKTRADERS,** and also writes Regency novels as "Rosemary Edgehill".

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Artwork by Vincent DiFate

Get With Child a Mandrake Root

"Help, please! Please, help?" The skinny homunculus capered before the raven. Batlike wings trembled anxiously, while sharp, irregular teeth bared in an ingratiating grin.

From his lofty perch atop the bookcase, Corbeau glared down his beak at the petitioner. "You wish me to do what?"

"Spit. Please?" Nightshade stopped dancing under that daunting yellow-eyed scorn. Hesitantly, he extended his bowl clutched in dry, twiggy fingers. "Please?"

"Birds don't do that," Corbeau said caustically. "And I would not, even if I could. It's disgusting." Ruffling his feathers, he hunched away from the proffered dish and the malodorous odors wafting up to him. "What have you got in there?"

"Things," Nightshade whispered, shielding the bowl at his shoulder. "Magical things. Like mistress makes."

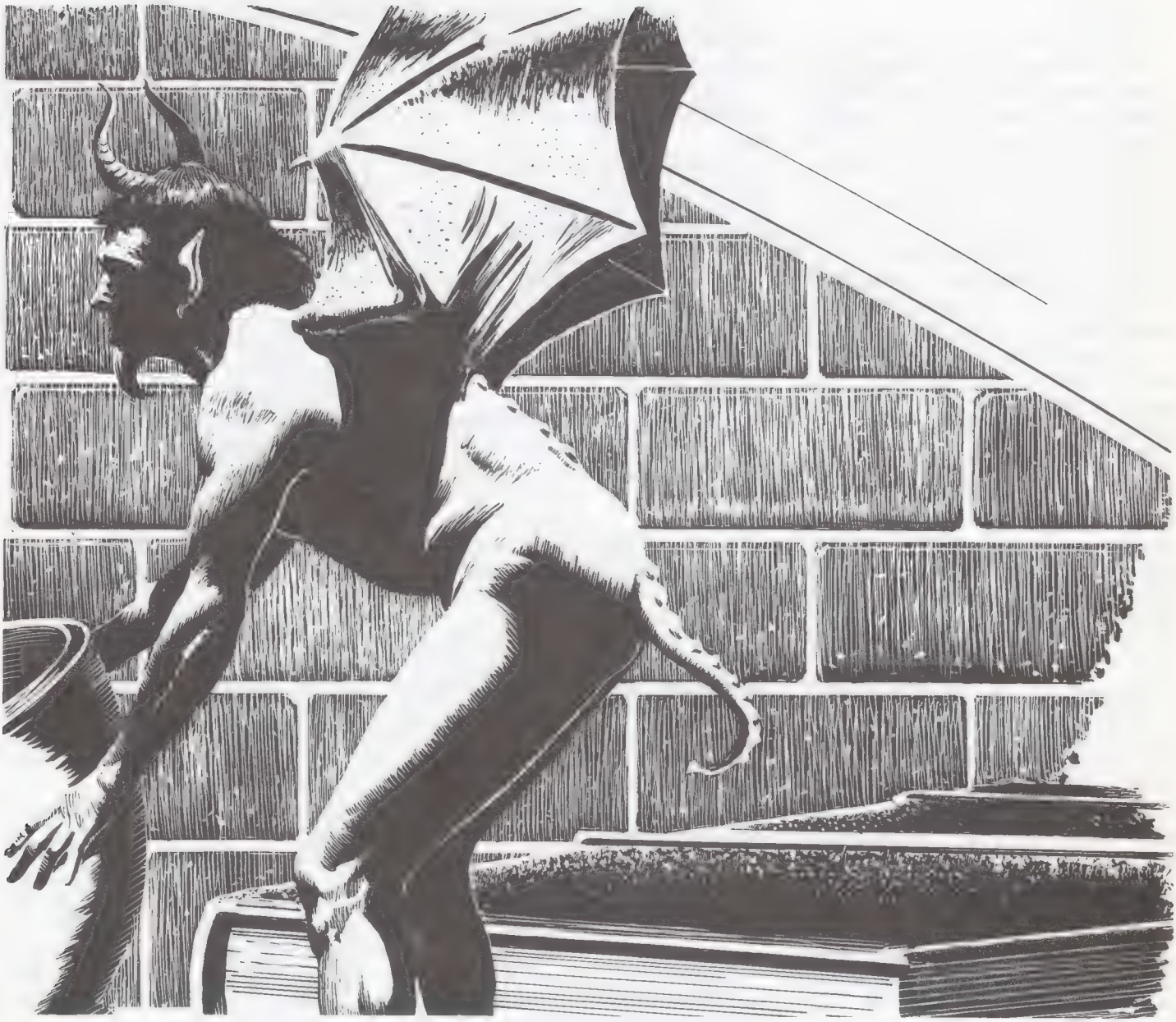
"Mistress makes? Oh-ho, so our little Nightshade is trying his hand at becoming a mage?"

"Little magic," the homunculus hedged, leathery wings folded close. "Not bother anyone."

"When Selene finds out, she'll be furious. Perhaps she'll even dismantle you. Make another Nightshade to take your place."

"Yes! Make another!" The homunculus's grin returned, broader

by K. Kimberly Prosser and Lisa Swope



than ever, and he bobbed enthusiastically.

"You *want* another homunculus around here? I certainly don't. One is far too many for me, and I can't understand what Selene sees in you to begin with. No, another is two more than a bird can bear."

Nightshade's gremlin face screwed up in genuine distress at the raven's harsh words. Tears trailed down his dried-out cheeks. "Nightshade need another Nightshade. Mistress have men-friends, yes. Corbeau have lady-bird, yes. Even big Dark-horse have lady-friend. Have lady-friends *many*! But Nightshade-ladies, no. Nightshade look and look!" the homunculus wailed, plopping down on the stone floor, with his precious bowl still cradled in his arms. "Nightshade *lonely*."

"There aren't any more Nightshades to find, you silly thing. You weren't hatched like any normal creature — myself, for example. You were created. I was there when Selene made you. I saw it all. I'm sorry, but there it is."

The straggle-haired head lifted. New interest lit the dark button eyes. "Corbeau saw Nightshade made? Corbeau *saw* what mistress did?"

"Yes. The spell work is all right there in that great book of hers." Taking wing, Corbeau lazily glided down to land atop the thick tome sitting on the work table. "Right in here." He pecked the leather binding. "There's a recipe for you, if you please."

"Then make *more* Nightshades!" Scrabbling up from the floor, the homunculus padded over to the table, hopped up onto its broad surface to join the raven. "All in here. Corbeau said."

"No, no. Oh, no." The raven stalked around the book, beak held high. "Impossible. How can you possibly think to recreate such a complicated spell when you don't know the first thing about magic? You can't even read. It's hopeless, you twitty little thing."

Nightshade nodded solemnly. "Corbeau right. Corbeau smart. Very smart. Can read, yes?"

"Yes," the raven said smugly, preening a feather in modest distraction. "I learned long ago."

"Can read book? Big book?"

"Of course I can read this book. I've sat on it for simply years, watching

Selene work."

"Then Corbeau read to Nightshade."

"Yes, I certainly cou—" Shiny black eyes widened. "Absolutely not! Selene would pluck me bald if I let you meddle with her ceremonies and such. I will not be an accomplice to such dangerous nonsense."

"Corbeau help! Please? Corbeau smart. Nightshade not know how. Nightshade so lonely. Please?"

Cocking his head, the raven studied the homunculus. A tear ran down Nightshade's crooked nose, splashed onto a skinny toe as he swayed back and forth in his misery. The homunculus's wails grew louder as Corbeau tried to ignore him. The tears fell faster.

"Oh, all right," the raven muttered. "Stop sniveling, will you? I'll help you. Goddess knows why, but I will. Likely nothing will come of it," he warned, hopping off the book. "It's a very complicated spell. Takes a proper mage to do it right, which you," he added, pointing a claw at the homunculus, "are *not*."

"Nightshade have friend then, yes!" the homunculus burbled, ignoring Corbeau's warnings. "Nightshade have *two* friends: Nightshade-friend and Corbeau-friend. Corbeau *best* friend!"

"Oh, leave off! I am not your friend. I just cannot abide public scenes, that's all. And turn this back, will you?" The raven pecked at the book's heavy cover. "I can't get the proper angle to open it."

"Nightshade turn, yes! Nightshade good to turn pages." Flapping his wings for leverage, the homunculus seized the cover and began heaving over great chunks of pages.

"There it goes, that page — no, wait. Go back. Go *back* — the other way!"

Pages flew backward. Nightshade drove his finger into a page full of diagrams and scribbles. "This one? This one make Nightshade-friend?"

"Yes, this one. Or it did, before you lost it. Stop fanning your wings, you're blowing over the pages. Not to mention what your antics are doing to my feathers. Now sit still and listen."

"Listen, yes!" The homunculus squatted down on his haunches, black eyes fixed on Corbeau with rapt attention.

The raven traced the spell with the tip of his wing. "You'll need a mandrake root, cut at the full of the moon with a consecrated knife. Oh, that's it. It's over. You haven't got a knife."

"Nightshade get."

"You can't. Only Selene has an athame, and you know how she feels about *anyone* touching her things."

"Nightshade *get*," the homunculus repeated sullenly, hunching his shoulders.

"Beyond that, you'll need blood and semen, horse dung — "

"Got lots horse poop. Dark horse makes lots. Pile in kitchen now. *Big* pile!"

"I'm very pleased for you. But where will you find the rest of these ingredients? Forget it. You can't do it." Pronouncement made, Corbeau flew out the turret's open window and into the sunlight beyond.

"Nightshade find," the homunculus growled after his departing mentor. "Corbeau see. Nightshade get *all* things."

Two days later, the homunculus peeked around the turret's doorway, rustled his wings in agitation. "Mistress gone away?"

Corbeau stopped preening long enough to peer down from his favorite skull perch atop the mantle. "Selene is out with her horses. Why?"

"Gone long time?"

"She always spends hours with her foals. You know that."

"Good." The homunculus offered a wide, toothy grin and waddled into the room. "Have Nightshade root."

"Nightshade root? What — Oh, you mean a mandrake? You actually *found* a mandrake? I didn't think you knew what one was."

"Nightshade fetch many things for pretty lady-mistress spells. Nightshade knows, yes." The thick brown root was tossed onto the table with a thud. The ever-present wooden bowl was shoved up after it, and Nightshade balanced on his skinny toes to peer over the table edge at Corbeau. "Have root. What now?"

"It won't work. That root had to be cut during the full moon —"

"Moon full. Last night."

"Are you certain?" Corbeau demanded. "The moon must be exactly full, and I don't believe it was."

"How Corbeau know? Bird sleep through dark. Nightshade knows moon. Was full."

"It had to be cut with an athame, like Selene's special knife. If it wasn't, that mandrake's no good for this."

"Was cut." Nightshade grinned and shoved a double-edged, ornate knife up beside the root.

"You *stole* the mistress's ... Oh, my stars and wing-feathers! Do you know what you've done, you stupid little thing? Oh, by the shell that hatched me, she'll kill you. Worse, she'll kill *me* if she finds out that I had anything to do with this."

"Corbeau said do, Nightshade do. Nightshade get good root, yes. What now?"

Corbeau stared at him. "Now, you go away! I'm not having anything more to do with this. Not one bit! I never dreamed you'd do something so — so — horrible! So improper —"

The homunculus's eyes narrowed into slits. "Corbeau promised help. Nightshade tell mistress, will."

Corbeau shut his beak with a startled click. "You wouldn't."

"Corbeau promised."

The raven considered his very vulnerable position as an accessory to the heinous thievery. Only one option precluded the loss of his position as Selene's favorite familiar — not to mention the loss of a tail-feather or two. Corbeau narrowed his gaze. "If I help, does Nightshade promise to keep his ugly, sharp-toothed mouth shut?"

The homunculus nodded vigorously. "Nightshade promise."

"Nightshade not as dumb as he looks."

"What now? More spit?"

Corbeau sidestepped along the mantle before dropping to the tabletop and surveying the contents of Nightshade's wooden bowl. "You don't need spit for this. You need mandrake root, blood, semen ... Phew! What have you got in there?"

"What Corbeau say get. And spit. Lots."

The raven looked again. "Spit? Whose?"

"Big dog," Nightshade said, referring to the wolf that slept at the end of Selene's bed. "Spit lots. Easy."

Corbeau shuddered and resolved not to look into that bowl again. "It's supposed to be human ingredients, but ... Oh, well. If a spell fails, that only reflects upon the mage, doesn't it? All right, so you've got spit. What about semen?"

"Easy. Dark horses have *lots* of lady-friends. Have *lots* of semen."

"You went out there while they were ... with all that snorting and squealing and stomping?"

Nightshade scowled. "Had lots,

won't miss any."

"But they were .... Oh, it's so disgusting, so violent. Not at all like the loving of birds." Corbeau ruffled his feathers in distaste.

"*Birds?*" shrilled Nightshade. "Birds not nice! Stand on lady-friend's back, peck her head! Nightshade watch, see!"

"You watched that? You watched *me*? Oh, you horrid little voyeur! See if I help you ever again!" Corbeau lifted his wings to take flight, but just as he pushed off the table, the homunculus grabbed the raven around the neck. Wings fanned frantically, clawed feet scrabbled.

"Let go *immediately*!"

"Corbeau break promise, Nightshade tell mistress about book." The threat, delivered nose-to-beak, was difficult to ignore.

The raven's sharp beak stabbed the nearest finger. Nightshade let go, and Corbeau dropped to the work table, all feathered outrage. Once the raven had preened himself back into some semblance of control, he sighed and confronted the homunculus again.

"You need blood. And who do you plan to ask for that? I cannot think of anyone or anything in this castle that would voluntarily spill its blood for your wretched little concoction. Why don't you give up now, and we'll forget all about thi— *AAAIII*!"

Corbeau whirled to stab his attacker again, only to find a blue-black feather dangling from Nightshade's thin fingers. "That was my tail-feather, you horrid little creation! A *new* feather! I'd only just finished growing it. How *dare* you!"

"New feather, yes. Blood inside, yes?" With a crooked smile, Nightshade dropped the feather into his bowl and stirred it with one long finger. "Nightshade have blood now. Good blood. Smart blood." Withdrawing the finger, he licked it. "What now?"

"Now you go *away*. I'm not speaking to you." The raven ran his beak over his remaining tail-feathers as though he was counting them.

"Tell mistress, yes —"

Cold raven eyes regarded Nightshade. "It's not enough blood. It won't work. You've failed."

"Will work," Nightshade replied confidently. "What now?"

Corbeau closed his eyes. "Now you bury all of that in horse dung by the full moon and you say an incantation over it and *you don't know the words*."

Wings fanning gently, Nightshade gathered up his smelly potion. "Corbeau knows. Corbeau help."

The bird sniffed. "I don't fly at night. Can't see properly."

"Nightshade carry. When mistress sleep. Full moon tonight. Nightshade come back." Twiggy fingers tapped the side of the bowl. "Need more blood feathers now. Maybe chicken," he mused, waddling out of the room. "Chickens like Nightshade. Chickens help Nightshade. Friends, yes. Friends, many."

That night, Corbeau struggled to maintain his balance on Nightshade's narrow shoulder as the homunculus waddled over the rough forest ground.

"Can't you walk any more carefully?" the raven complained. "I believe you are deliberately falling into holes just to make me more miserable."

"Ground is ground." Nightshade shrugged, making the raven shriek and fan his wings to catch his balance. Sharp talons scraped helplessly across the leathery skin, offering no security. "Bird don't like Nightshade walk? Bird fly."

"I can't fly in the dark."

"Not dark. Moon full."

"Moonlight isn't sunlight. I could fly into a tree or a cow or something. I won't do it."

"Ride, then. Nightshade walk."

"If you can call it that." The raven sulked. "Selene knows how to glide about properly on two feet. I don't know

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what to call your means of locomotion."

All progress stopped abruptly. Skinny fingers grasped the raven firmly around the throat and pulled him off his wobbly perch.

"*Aukkk*!" Corbeau squalled. "You horrid little thing! Stop doing that!"

The fingers opened obediently, dumping the abused raven to the ground to land in a tangle of feathers and temper.

Corbeau struggled to right himself. "What is that smell?"

"Horse poop."

"You brought me to the stables? Oh, my Goddess, we're on the dung heap! How disgusting. Here you, get on with it. I wish this debacle to be concluded as soon as possible, so that I might bathe in the pond and forget all about you."

"Moon full, like Corbeau say." Nightshade nodded in satisfaction. "Horse poops, many. What now?"

"Say the words over your mess and bury it. As quickly as possible, please. You did bring everything you need?"

"Brought, yes." The homunculus's sharp teeth glittered in the moonlight.

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"Then repeat after me — "

"Repeat?" Nightshade's brow furrowed. "Need peat? Moss?"

"No, *repeat*. Say what I say, twit."

"What I say twit."

"No! Just listen, *then* say it. Understand?"

Nightshade nodded and waited.

"By the full of the moon, I bury thee." Corbeau paused expectantly.

"Moon full, yes. Bury."

"Say what I said."

"Did."

"You didn't. You have to say the same words: 'By the full of the moon, I bury thee.' Now, you say it."

"Moon full. Bury, yes."

"No, no, *no*! The words have to be exactly the same! The way they're written in Selene's book."

The homunculus scowled. "*Did* say. Said good."

"Oh, by my hatching shell," the raven moaned to the stars overhead, "how did I ever get involved in such a disaster? What did I do to deserve such a fate, I ask you? I've been a good familiar. I've done everything my mistress has asked of me. So why am I out here in the stinking darkness, arguing with this illiterate thing?"

Nightshade's lower lip crept out in a warning pout. "Tell mistress, will."

In his agitation, Corbeau added preening to complaining. "It's because I'm too nice a bird," he mumbled around a beak full of black feathers. "I'm just too kind, and everyone is always taking advantage of a sweet fellow like me. All right," he concluded, nudging soft feathers back in place along his breast. "I'll say the words, and you bury your box. It will go faster that way."

The homunculus's lunatic smile returned with increased radiance. "Bird talk. Nightshade dig." Leaping onto the side of the dung heap, he sank his fingers deep in the soft muck to send the first handful flying over his shoulder.

"Hey! Here now, watch where you're tossing that offal. You nearly hit me."

"Nightshade sorry." He never looked up from his excavations. "Nightshade dig good, yes. Bird *talk*."

"Bird talk. How humiliating. Oh, all right." Ruffling his plumage, Corbeau straightened, cocked his head and began the incantation in a deep and serious voice. "By the full of the moon, I bury thee. By the full of the moon, I order thee. Grow in sunlight to give

you warmth, darkness to give you strength."

The incantation continued, broken only by brief pauses as Corbeau was forced to dodge especially enthusiastic handfuls of manure flung his way. At last, Corbeau uttered the final words.

"Hole done," panted Nightshade, staggering off the dung heap. "What now?"

The raven shrugged. "Stuff your — your concoction in there, and cover it up."

Nightshade waddled back to lovingly shove his box deep into the manure cave. Surrounding horse droppings were tucked about it, and with a final pat, Nightshade turned back to his mentor. "What now?"

"Now, we go home," Corbeau replied emphatically. "Absolutely nothing will happen until the next full moon. And probably not even then, I warn you."

"Will. What then?"

"Dig up your mess and pour blood over it. But you'll never get any more blood, so your root will just stay a nasty, foul-smelling lump soaked in horse pee. Forget it now, will you?"

"No. Nightshade wait." The homunculus staggered back atop his dung heap.

"Wait? It's another bloody month before the next full moon. You're not sitting on this heap the whole time? Nothing's going to happen."

"Nightshade wait." The homunculus plopped down in the midden with an air of infinite patience.

"What about the blood? Do you think it will come and find you here? And you can't kill anything, remember? Not without Selene's permission, and she'll never grant leave for you to hurt anything — not so much as a worm — that lives here."

"Nightshade good homunculus. Nightshade not hurt anyone. Never."

"Fine." The raven sniffed. "Take me back to the castle, will you? But don't touch me. You smell appalling and I don't want any more of that muck on my feathers." A long moment passed, but the new sorcerer did not move. "Get up, will you? I don't want to linger here."

"Nightshade wait."

"What about me?" Corbeau screeched. "I don't want to wait here for the sun to come up. You have to carry me back."

"Nightshade wait."

The raven paced an agitated circle. "Oh, my teeth and talons! Oh, *pinfeathers*! I'm stuck here with a stupid homunculus. A stinking, stupid homunculus. How do I get into these horrible situations?"

The four weeks past slowly, with Corbeau managing to forget about the rotting, mangled magical experiment hidden in the manure. As Nightshade stayed on his dung heap, Corbeau even convinced himself that he'd forgotten the homunculus, but that took a great deal of repeating. All of Corbeau's efforts were for nothing when the little monster returned, crashing into the turret room in the wee hours of the morning, nearly startling the raven off his favorite ceiling-beam roost.

"Time finish Nightshade-friend! Moon full. Corbeau come. Dig now, yes?" the homunculus babbled enthusiastically, hopping from foot to foot in his excitement.

"Dig?" Corbeau arrowed down to land on the back of Selene's chair. "You mean you still want to see that mess you created? Listen to me, Nightshade. Nothing will happen. You can dig and dance around it all you want to, but the spell wasn't done right. Nothing will happen."

Nightshade pouted. "Corbeau come. Corbeau know what to do."

"It's too late," the raven protested. "It's dark, and —"

"Tell —" The warning in Nightshade's voice was clear.

"The mistress. I know, I know. Very well. One more trek into the wilds, and that's it. It's over tonight, yes?"

Nightshade nodded happily. Shifting the leather bag he clutched, he held up a skinny arm.

"All right, then." Corbeau sighed, stepping onto the proffered arm. "Get on with it. But tonight you bring me back."

"Nightshade promise." He bobbed in a series of raven-rattling nods. "Bring back, promise."

"Stop that, and go on."

Nightshade pattered out of the turret and down the stone staircase.

The second trip out was just as unpleasant as the first had been for Corbeau, with the nares in his beak warning him when they drew near their destination.

"Oh Goddess, why am I here?" he moaned. "I can't help, I can't even see anything. Just put me down and leave me out of this."

"Corbeau see Nightshade-friend." The homunculus sounded petulant. "Magic to do. Blood, yes?"

"Blood? Yes, there must be blood to bring the thing to life, but where would you find ... " Corbeau stood taller on the homunculus's shoulder, horror widening his eyes. "Nightshade, whose blood do you have?"

Upending his bag, Nightshade dumped its contents on the ground with a clatter and ominous squishy thuds. "Brought light for Corbeau. Candle, yes!"

Eventually, a candle's flame sputtered forth bravely in the darkness, weakly illuminating the dung pile and the homunculus. Guarding the flame, Nightshade stuck the candle in the side of the manure, out of the breeze.

"Whose blood do you have, monster? Tell me now."

"Magg's."

"Magg's? Who is — oh, the goose? You killed the goose?"

The homunculus twisted his head around to look at the raven on his shoulder, genuinely offended. "Nightshade not kill Magg. Magg friend. Fox maybe kill. Fox always dumb-goose hungry."

"You brought a dead goose out here? And I rode with it?" Corbeau hid his head beneath a wing. "Oh, Goddess, I'm going to be ill."

"Not bring goose. Fox take goose-part. I bring Magg. Magg not mind."

Corbeau lifted his head to discover that Nightshade was holding the lolling head of a dead goose. Its limp neck hung below Nightshade's hand, dripping blood slowly onto the grass.

"See? Magg not mind." Nightshade shook the goose-head and watched it roll from side to side, over what passed for his thumb. "What now?"

"Um, d-dig up the root," Corbeau stammered, very glad he wasn't that goose. "And your, ah, your Magg is dripping. You might want to keep the blood safe?"

"Oh, Magg got lots. Is good." Dropping the goose head, Nightshade dove into his muck heap. Flying feces rained for a few dangerous, foul-smelling moments before the homunculus reappeared with a moldering, slimy wooden box cradled against his bony chest. Wings rustled in an excess of excitement as the box was placed, with great reverence, at Corbeau's clawed feet.

"What now?" Nightshade repeated,

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breathless.

"Open it." Corbeau's voice was all but strangled by the smell. He twisted his head slightly to one side, in hopes of breathing cleaner air, but his efforts helped little.

Dirty hands eagerly pried off the lid and dumped the box's contents onto the grass. Nightshade wrinkled his nose as he studied his friend. "Is there. But not look good."

"Blood," gasped Corbeau, tottering away from the rotting pile. "It needs blood sprinkled on it."

"Magg-blood, yes." The goosely remains were snatched up and waved enthusiastically over the lump. "Magg, Magg, Magg," Nightshade sang as he squeezed the last of the blood from the goose's neck. "Magg Nightshade's friend. Magg make Nightshade-friend."

"Oh, spare me," moaned Corbeau. "Oh, Goddess protect me ...."

The raven's voice faded away as the lump began moving. Twitching, it uncoiled itself, grew larger in the candlelight. It was black as the night that had birthed it, as black and glossy-feathered as the raven beside it.

Balancing on the edge of the box, the thing stretched to its full height. Fanning new, drying wings, it beat them into life.

"Dear Goddess, what is it? Nightshade, what have you *done*?"

The thing turned its rough-feathered head toward the sound of Corbeau's voice. Its sharp beak parted with a rusty honk. A goose's honk. Bright avian eyes blinked, gazed steadily at Corbeau with what might have been instant adoration. Leaping lightly to the ground, the thing stretched its horselike body and headed toward its new master. Clawed chicken feet scraped the ground as it moved. Black raven wings beat in time with its trot, and the creature honked again. Closer now, the creature reached out to touch Corbeau with its chicken, goose or raven's beak — Corbeau couldn't tell which it was in the faint light. Corbeau didn't care.

Shrieking, the raven launched himself into the air. With total disregard for flying blindly in the dark, he headed with all speed back to the castle, to the safety of his turret and its very high, safe ceiling beams.

"*Honk!*" the new homunculus cried mournfully. Untried wings lifted it from the ground, and into an erratic first flight. It hovered for a moment, equine torso and chicken feet hovering just beyond Nightshade's nose. "*Honk!*" it cried again before flapping awkwardly after Corbeau.

"Noooo!" wailed Nightshade. "You Nightshade-friend, not Corbeau-friend. Wait!" Flapping his own wings, Nightshade flew after the creature. "Please, wait? Not go with bad bird.

Bad bird not friend! *Nightshade* friend! Waiiiittt!"

Selene awoke to pre-dawn chaos. The sun was just beginning to show signs of peeping through the misty clouds at the edge of the horizon, but her household was already fully awake. The shouts echoing off the stones told her that something disastrous was happening up in the tower.

Pausing only to catch up a blanket to wrap around her slender self, the witch and mistress of the keep ran up the stone steps, ready to face whatever intruder might have violated the sanctity of her workroom. Throwing herself through the turret doorway, Selene ordered several lamps ablaze. Two familiars blinked at her in the sudden light. Between them hovered a bizarre guest.

Half-horse and half-bird, it was trying to land next to Corbeau atop the highest bookcase. Feathers ruffled and golden eyes gleaming, the raven screamed in fury, fought with stabbing beak and mantled wings to defend his territory.

Flapping in manic outrage, Nightshade circled the room. "Make bad bird give back!" he screeched over Selene's head. "Is *Nightshade's* friend, yes! *NOT-FAIR NOT-FAIR NOT-FAIR NOT-FA-*"

"*QUIET!*" the witch shouted, her voice freezing Nightshade in midair, so that he tumbled to the floor in a tangle of arms and legs.

"Not-fair, not-fair," he whispered, righting himself and waddling to her side.

Under Selene's glower, even the newcomer settled without argument. Landing on the work table, it folded its wings carefully to avoid knocking over a stack of parchment, but swished its long black silky tail in irritation.

"What is that?" The witch pointed at the creature.

"Is Nightshade-friend!" came the screech. "Nightshade make, yes, but bad-bird Corbeau steal! Make bad bird give back, mistress, please?"

"Are you telling me that you *created* this ... whatever it is?"

Nightshade nodded madly in affirmation, while Corbeau suddenly decided that his tail-feathers were in terrible disrepair and required intense preening.

"My little homunculus made another little homunculus?" Selene said. "That's unheard of. How did you manage to learn how to do this?" Before Nightshade could answer, Selene's gaze swiveled to her raven. "Corbeau, can you shed some light on the mystery?"

"Well, I ... um ... that is, Nightshade and I might have, ah, discussed it. In a purely philosophical manner, or course."

"Of course. Which is why my Book of Shadows has claw marks and wrinkled pages?"

The raven looked away. "I had nothing to do with that."

"Corbeau tell Nightshade how," the homunculus said. "Nightshade lonely, want friend. Corbeau watch Nightshade made. Tell how. Then *steal* Nightshade-friend."

"I didn't steal it!" the raven shrieked, flapping and hopping in place. "I can't even stand to look at it. Take it, take it back, and keep it far away from me. I don't ever want to set eyes on the horrid little thing again."

The new homunculus cocked its head and offered a forlorn cheep.

"So the two of you conspired to use my book, cast spells with my tools, and pretty much took magical matters into your own ... claws, shall we say?" Selene nailed the raven with a look.

"We meant no harm," Corbeau offered, suddenly humble in his guilt.

"Who read from my book?"

"Ah, Mistress, ah, I might have repeated ... a few words ... here and there ...."

"Who stole my athame?"

"Nightshade took it," said Corbeau, with an alacrity that had been missing from his previous confession. "I told him not to. *Warned* him, but would he listen? Oh, no. He was headstrong and determined and nothing I said could possibly —"

"Who listed the ingredients?" pursued Selene. "Who collected the materials?"

"It was a matter of —"

"And who read the incantation?"

"Corbeau read good, yes!"

"Shut up, you smelly little monster!" snapped Corbeau.

"*Honk!*"

"Quiet!" demanded Selene once again. Silence dropped like a heavy cloak over the workroom. "I now see what's been happening while I've been busy elsewhere," the witch continued. "I had no idea that my assistants had such incentive. Or imagination."

She eyed the unique creation on her table. It pricked equine ears at her and stamped one foreleg on the wood, chicken claws scratching the surface as it turned its adoring gaze back toward Corbeau.

"Hmm, hard as hooves, are they? Amazing."

"M-mistress?" quavered Corbeau, sidling farther away on the bookcase. "Mistress, what will you do with us?"

"Do with you?" Selene raked her gaze over the assembled miscreants and laughed softly. "Nothing, Corbeau. I don't need to do a thing. I hope the three of you will be a very happy family. Take good care of your child, you two."

With that, Selene departed, gesturing the room back into pre-dawn darkness as she left. Her laughter echoed off the stone walls as she headed back to the warmth of her bed.

Lifting off the table, the new homunculus soared up to land beside Corbeau. Devoted eyes blinked at him. "*Honk!*" the creature offered as it sidled close, leaning against the raven's wing and rubbing its beak against his breast feathers. Corbeau shivered in revulsion.

The sound of leathery wings flapping informed the raven that Nightshade was airborne. The smell hit next, as the homunculus settled on Corbeau's far side and edged closer to lean against him. Scraping his wings together to settle them, Nightshade looked murderous as the sun began peering over the horizon. The newcomer lovingly burrowed closer.

"Oh, Goddess," Corbeau moaned, looking from one to the other. "Why me?"

❄

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Vincent DiFate received a Hugo as Best Professional Artist in 1979 as well as the Skylark and the Lensman Awards and was the Artist Guest of Honor at the 1992 Worldcon.

A Game of Djinn

by Mary Mannon Reeves

How long have I been here, my arms uplifted, surrounded by a whirlwind of frozen light and power? A century, at least, judging by the depth of guano just beyond our captive sphere.

It's usually the last wish that screws them up. You know the routine: they wish for money, power, and then something utterly useless, like love, which then strips them of their money and power. Personally, my favorite is the couple that ended up with a sausage. Practical. Nobody ever thinks practically anymore.

But Anjoree blew it on the second wish. She and Ramaal, her lover, rolled around on a carpet of silk and gold, wearing what they couldn't stuff in their pockets. After getting foolish and sticky and thoroughly ruining the carpet, she caressed my lamp as though I'd been the silent partner in their sweaty menage, and made the mistake.

"I wish it could always be like this."

I don't usually get caught in the backwash of a spell, which is what protects Djinn from the wishing-for-more-wishes loop, but this was an alpha-omega sort of thing. In order for it to always be like this, I had to be there, and in order for everything to stay like it was, it had to stay *just like it was!*

So there we were, a hundred years later, frozen in gesture, permanent statuary in Solomon's cave.

We had visitors, of course. Secret lairs are a popular stop on the pilgrimage route. The bats tell me that Ali Baba's convinced his Hashashim to give up the thieving bit and go for a subtler bit of extortion. They're charging admittance, and have plans for a floor show.

Our own visitors are less entertainment-minded. We get the questors. No doubt the glamour that holds Anjoree motionless has added something to her plain, human features. The men come, knights and Saracens, Moors and moguls, and they vie for the chance to rescue her. None seem to notice the ragged young man whose legs are tangled with her own.

It is amazing how little magic, and how many years, it takes to create a princess from a peon.

They come, they fight their way into the sphere long enough to grab my lamp and rub it. But "always like this" does not include extras, and they are thrown from the circle while my lamp glides back to its resting place. They have the right idea, for only I can break the spell I set, but they have one problem to overcome.

Anjoree has one more wish.

The contract is very clear. I must fulfill her three wishes before moving on to another owner. That business with Aladdin, pishwah. He and his uncle set it up. As soon as one used his three wishes, the other "stole" the lamp, and the Djinn was forced to grant three more wishes. Over and over they pulled this scam. They'll be lawyers in another life.

I don't remember how the Djinn slipped out of the loophole, but it had something to do with sausages, which are practical but unhealthy, especially in a Muslim town.

I was beginning to long for Solomon, not so much for his wisdom in the matter, but I figured he, of all people, would be able to get me out of the fix, only if to seal me up in a bottle for eternity. After a century of watching Anjoree and Ramaal frozen mid-writhe, the bottle seemed preferable.

Then Hamar snuck in. Hope surged when I saw the animated bundle of rags creep through the cavern. Beggars or princes in disguise always stand a better chance than those posturing idiots the kings and sultans send. Wit and grit over silver and steel. A dull jug hung from his belt, the distinctive seal glowing in the dim light. Another Djinn.

Smoke billowed as the seal was cracked and, for once, I was grateful for my immobile features. I detest showy entrances, and rolling my eyes at the newcomer wouldn't exactly endear him to my cause.

"Oh, J'meera," a smooth voice rumbled from the solidifying fog. "What have you done this time?"

When I didn't — couldn't — answer, M'Laar bellowed with laughter.

"It took the mortal's wisest mind to trap me, sister, not a ragamuffin grave robber. Let's see what can be done."

His master gave a timid cough. "Umm ... my wishes?"

M'Laar looked down on the pitiful boy — a real beggar, for a prince is a prince, in silk, rags, or stark naked.

"Before you waste your wishes on something useless, may I make a suggestion?"

The boy's eyes narrowed. We Djinn are not known for philanthropy. It is said that any child born from a Djinn and human coupling inherits the worst of both species. They inevitably end up in politics.

"Let's hear the suggestion."

"I can't break M'Jeera's spell. The most I can do is release its holder — the girl — for a brief moment, long enough to make her third wish. Unless a hundred years of freeze tag has rotted her brains, she will know what wish to make."

"And that will only take one wish of mine?"

Stupid boy. There is a reason for three wishes. To get something you want, and don't need; to get something you need, but don't want; and to restore your life as it was, hopefully with a lesson learned.

To my surprise, M'Laar's spell worked, and Anjoree shuddered with her brief freedom. If time had been frozen before, it was petrified now, waiting for her to make the third wish. Phrasing is so important ....

"I wish ..." her voice whispered along piles of dusty gold, "I wish that we who have been kept here will be set free, with our wealth and our health intact."

Good girl.

The lightstorm burst into a swirling frenzy about my head and arms. Anjoree's lover stretched and yawned and reached for his playmate as though his loins had been percolating for the ages. She rolled away and threw the lamp back at him, a puny sort of substitute for sex in his eyes. Not to mention useless.

"Now for my last two wishes ..." Hamar held his own jug up, confronting my brother Djinn. One colossal eyebrow rose, amusement hidden behind the smoke.

"Wait a minute! Wait-a-minute!" Anjoree grasped her savior's sleeve before he could utter something foolish.

"You have to be very careful about these things," I heard her coo as she led him from the cave. "It's all in the phrasing ...."

M'Laar lingered, like heat scar left in the night by a passing torch.

"Very clever, Sister," he chuckled. "She doesn't even realize what she's done."

"Nor does he." I nodded at the deserted Ramaal below me, cradling the lamp with a greedy gleam in his eye.

"Was it worth the wait?"

"A hundred years in a moldy cave in exchange for freedom? You've spent three times that long in your jug, and aren't free yet. You tell me."

I kept the boy beglamoured long enough to let the others get away. Knowingly or not, Anjoree had given a Djinn the one thing a Djinn can't get for himself. Freedom. I owed her something for that.

As for the boy, well, I didn't leave him hungry, or even damned. As a last gesture of goodwill, I changed the sausages into lamb.

Artwork by Adrian Bourne

*

Mary Mannon Reeves lives in Tennessee with her husband and two young sons. In the past eighteen years she has had jobs ranging from grooming show horses to assembling cardboard boxes. Currently she works in an after-school child care program. She would like to dedicate this story to her mother "who has encouraged my writing since the first time I picked up a pencil", and also to the repairman at the local computer shop.

Adrian Bourne does animation and illustration for computer games and notes that he sports a "signature artist's ponytail and required little hoop earrings".

The Grandmother's Stone

by Harold Thompson

Though he was dressed in a plain wool coat, there was no mistaking Karl Gann's preferred occupation. Between his pack and his back lay a long broadsword, and into his wide belt had been thrust two flintlock pistols. He was, as they say, armed to the teeth, though perhaps his weapons were not his most identifying mark. Instead, that mark was the curling feather that sprouted from his felt hat. A *red* feather. Wizards often wore a blue plume, and merchants a black, though others were known to sport those colors as well. Red, however, was *always* the color for soldiers.

The feather bobbed as he tramped along the valley road, boots squeaking on the packed snow. On either side of him rose the giant spruce trees, branches weighted with snow, and above them the glassy blue of the mountains, glowing in the full moonlight. He felt cheerful, and looked forward to reaching the village that he knew lay ahead, a village with the wonderful name of Traveler's Vale. There he would find the warmth he sought. Warmth after the hard winter campaign. "They'll welcome a soldier in the Vale," he said to himself, "as they would in all of Woodcutters' Land, so many woodsmen having followed the sword at one time."

He rounded a bend and saw the village ahead, the bright yellow of the lanterns lining the main street, and the cozy glow from the windows of the houses. The largest glow came from the leaded panes of the inn, the Double Axe, the oldest building in the village, having once stood alone. Over time people had begun to settle around it, building their own houses and earning their livings by selling supplies to the many travelers who came through the valley. Business was assured, for the travelers would always come.

The inn's common room was full of such travelers when Karl burst through the wide door, stepping into laughter and smoke and the clinking of cutlery. He was just in time for dinner.

"Ho, innkeeper," he said, doffing his hat and stepping to the long bar. He drew a few stares with the big sword and the pistols but, as he thought, he sensed no tension. These people had likely seen many more armed men in the last weeks. "I trust you have vacancy?"

The innkeeper, a bald man in a leather apron, eyed him cautiously. "Come from the wars, have you?" he asked.

"Aye," Karl replied, then added, "You have nothing to fear from me, Innkeeper. I was on the winning side."

The man returned the smile, the caution gone. "So you fought for the Duchess? Good. We supported her, here in Woodcutters' Land. Yes, we have a room. Do you have a horse?"

Minutes later, Karl was led upstairs by a boy and shown to his room. He thanked the lad, gave him a penny, then stowed his pack, coat, and hat in the room's small closet. Through force of habit, he kept his weapons with him when he returned to the common room. There he found a small table in a corner not far from the large fireplace.

He ordered a meal, ate it quickly, then sat back in his chair. He felt satisfied. There was a steaming mug of apple cider on the table in front of him. Fine stuff, that. A good drink to aid one's contemplation.

His eyes strayed to his sword against the wall, the pistols on the table. Why do I do it? he wondered, asking himself a question others usually put to him. Why did the youngest son of a nobleman — though a minor nobleman, it was true — hire himself out as a mercenary? And why did he pick and choose his campaigns so carefully, always chasing after some cause to fight for, sometimes fighting with an army, and sometimes fighting alone?

To these queries, he would often answer by explaining, "The life of a landowner is dull, and I like adventure. I like to fight, and I'm good at it. As for always choosing a worthy cause, that's simply because my older brothers used to knock me down all the time just because they could. When I grew older, I knocked *them* down. But I am grateful to them, for they taught me a lesson: it is not fun to be in a position of disadvantage, to be pressed by others. So, whenever possible, I fight for those who cannot fight for themselves. My little personal revenge, I suppose. It's quite satisfying."

Artwork by Elizabeth Hop■ Shaw

Satisfying, too, had been the recent war to prevent the annexation of the Duchy of Kempe by Malcha, Kempe's most powerful neighbor. Two engagements, one fought in a raging blizzard, and Kempe was free, and Karl Gann had come to the end of another adventure.

Reflecting on this as he sat with his hot cider, he suddenly began to feel very lonely. It was hard to be by oneself after so many weeks of close camaraderie.

But there was company there in the common room, and he began listening to the conversations around him, trying to find one that intrigued him.

"Such fine soup!" an old woman across from him was saying. "Where would I be without my bowl of soup on a cold winter's evening such as this?"

This was rather mundane stuff, but Karl examined the speaker anyway, a plump and gray-headed grandmother. With her was a young girl of about twelve years, her blonde hair tied into a long braid, her great wide eyes like a fawn's. Both she and the old woman were dressed in traveling clothes of dull brown and gray. Not a very interesting pair.

Karl was about to take his attention elsewhere when the girl said, "Grandmother, your magic things have spilled from their sack."

"Oh, dear!" the old woman exclaimed, then began gathering something up from the floor. Karl saw that it was an assortment of jewelry, statuettes, and other ornamental objects, all of which had apparently spilled from a canvas bag.

"Here," said a nearby serving maid, "let me help you. My, this is a queer old bunch of things, ain't it?"

"My *magical* things, my dear," the old woman explained proudly, thrusting the items back into their sack. "Each one has its own particular property."

"Here, are you telling me these things have *powers*?" the serving maid said skeptically. Karl was skeptical, too.

"So they do, so they do. I collected them over the years, from village witches and even some great wizards, I don't mind telling you."

"Grandmother," the girl said worriedly, taking hold of the old woman's arm.

"Shush, Melly! Now see this ring?" she asked the serving maid. "It cures headaches. If you have a headache, just put this on and ping! Your headache's gone. And this here bell with no ringer? I'm told that it can call up a thunderstorm, though I've always been afraid to try it, and don't know for sure. But my most prized object, I don't mind telling you, is this." She produced a smooth green stone from the sack and held it up in the lantern light. It was translucent, and looked like a polished oval of bottle glass. "This I value above all of my other objects."

As Karl looked on in amusement, a man dressed all in black approached the old woman. The fellow had short hair greased back, a thin ratlike face, and Karl instantly did not like the look of him. Untrustworthy, he seemed. In his hand he held a hat with a sky-blue plume.

"Pardon me, madam," the fellow said with a leering smile, "my name is Hammot. Roch Hammot. I could not help overhearing your explanation of the contents of that sack. Magical objects, you say? I *myself* am a magician. Would you be willing to sell any of these things? That green stone, for instance?"

A look of horror came over the old woman's face. "Sell? My precious green stone?"

"Don't do it, Grandmother," the girl, Melly, insisted.

Karl chuckled to himself. Magic, he had always thought, was the domain of scholars who worked very hard over long years, and he doubted the authenticity of any of the old woman's objects. This Hammot fellow was certainly about to be cheated, if he were fool enough to offer money for any of the things, magician or not.

Karl downed the last of his mug of cider, then called for another. It came, and he held it, waiting for it to cool a bit, mind wandering away from the old woman and her bag of tricks, recalling some of the details of the recent campaign. He was no longer feeling lonely for some reason, but content. Perhaps it was the cider, which he could feel creeping up on him. Whatever the reason, he had found his warmth. That warmth was disturbed by a sudden shouting, and he looked up to see the old woman and her granddaughter shrinking away from Hammot, who was cursing at them for not selling "the green stone". Karl leapt to his feet, about to go to the old woman's aid, but two tough-looking fellows caught the man in black by his spindly arms and began dragging him toward the door. With one swift move, the man threw them off, and they both landed heavily on the floor.

Hammot stood over them and sneered, "Very well. I will leave. But because it is my *own* choice."

With that, he stormed out into the lantern-lit street, not bothering to close the door. One of the tough-looking fellows, back on his feet, closed it after him, growling, "That's the last time he shows his face in here!"

Karl nodded, agreeing with this declaration. Quite right, he thought. Then he went back to his steaming mug.

The next day he was late setting out on his journey, having slept rather longer than he had planned. It was past noon by the time he was able to resume his trek along the valley road, singing a few soldier's songs to himself. He did not really care about the time he had missed, for he was in no hurry. He was the unemployed son of a minor lord again, and his pockets were full of gold. He would walk all day and spend the night in one of the many woodcutters' huts that were in this part of the valley. And if all of the huts were occupied, then he would simply ask if he could share. He walked briskly, passing other travelers on foot, and being passed himself by those on horseback. He was enjoying himself again, could feel the huge wondrous weight of the mountains on either side of him.

Night came on, hailed by evening, the crystal stars coming out one by one in the clear winter sky. Soon the disk of the moon would rise again to light the way.

The road dipped between overhanging trees, a dark place. Karl hesitated, listening carefully. Had he just heard an animal's snarling? A human scream?

He slowly moved down into the darkness, right hand clutching one of his pistols. He heard the sound again, closer now, and unmistakable. The sounds of a struggle.

He drew both pistols and ran, the pack on his back bobbing. The road curved, and he came upon the scene suddenly, halting abruptly, astonished by what he saw.

The humans he recognized: the old woman from the inn caught in a tug-of-war with the thin-faced man in black, both gripping her sack of "magical" relics, while the old woman's granddaughter cowered in terror. What frightened the girl was apparently not

Hammot so much as his help: furry gray creatures with long snouts and snake-like tails, standing about three feet tall on their hind legs. To Karl they looked exactly like unnaturally large rats, though rats with intelligence, dressed in ragged clothing and wielding spears with which they menaced the girl and the old woman.

Karl hesitated for an instant, then fired one pistol, then the other, and two rats dropped to the road. "Stop!" he shouted, thrusting the spent pistols into his belt and smoothly drawing his sword.

The remaining rat-things blinked at him once, then fled into the forest. Hammot cursed at them, furious, then looked at Karl, saw the sword, let go his grip on the old woman's sack, and ran after the rats.

Karl sheathed the weapon and knelt before the old woman, who clutched her precious bundle to her chest, eyes wide. Her other baggage and the girl's lay discarded on the road.

"You are safe now, madam," he said, then saw that the girl's face was smeared with tears. He took a handkerchief from his pocket and passed it to her. "There, now. Wipe your face. The villain is gone."

"Thank you, sir," the old woman said between gasps. "I thought we were goners! Those horrible beasts." She looked fearfully at one of the dead creatures, which looked even more like a rat up close.

"Well," Karl said, rising and prodding one of the things with his boot, "the fellow may come back. I assume he wanted your green stone? Forgive me. I was at the Axe last night, and could not help overhearing your disagreement. Here, then." He helped Melly to her feet. "You may keep the handkerchief. Now, I suggest we travel together. There are some woodcutters' cottages not far ahead. I suggest we find one and build ourselves a warm fire."

Artwork by Elizabeth Hope Shaw

"Wise words for one so young," the old woman said. "What is your name, young man?"

"My name is Karl Gann. I fought for the Duchess in the war."

"I am Natane Morrill, though since you rescued me you may call me Natty. And this is my granddaughter, Melly."

Karl bowed. "Pleased to make your acquaintance, Natty, Melly."

The girl smiled, despite the dead things at her feet. A moment later they left those things behind and carried on down the road.

The moon had risen, and soon Karl found what he was looking for: a short path leading off to the right, ending at a cottage made of fitted logs with a stone chimney. A barn stood next to the cottage, and a frozen mountain lake behind it. Both the barn and the cottage were dark and empty.

Inside there were two rooms, one furnished with a rough wooden table, four wooden chairs, and a box of split

Artwork by Elizabeth Hope Shaw

logs. The other room contained two wooden beds with straw-stuffed mattresses. There was a sheepskin on the floor in the main room and a bundle of candles on the mantel.

"Quite luxurious, really," Karl declared as he set about lighting the candles, then a fire in the wide stone fireplace. "Woodcutters are fussy people, it seems."

There was an iron pot tied to Natty's pack, and she undid it and said, "I must boil some water." She packed the pot with snow from outside, then hung it above the fire.

"It seems that fellow *was* a magician after all," said Karl, plunking himself down in one of the chairs and holding his hands out to the flames. "Or perhaps warlock would be more appropriate. An evil man, to have created those rat creatures, if he did indeed create them himself. I have never seen or heard of their like before."

"Nor have I," Natty admitted, shuddering. The canvas sack was on her lap, and Melly sat on the sheepskin, hugging her grandmother's knees. "It was fortunate that you came when you did."

"Not really. The road is well traveled, even at night. The magician was taking a chance, assaulting you there." He stared into the fire for a moment, then turned back to his companions. "Tell me, why are you here, anyway? I find it odd, an old woman and a young girl, traveling alone and on foot in a time of war."

Natty gave him an indignant stare. "What is so odd? I have lived three times as long as you have, and have traveled across the kingdoms more times than I can remember. I am quite capable of finding my way, I assure you. As for going on foot, that is because we don't have a wagon, or even a horse or an old mule. But our feet are perfectly fine, thank you."

"I meant no offense, madam. But you must admit, there are dangers. What happened tonight is not so uncommon."

Natty stroked her granddaughter's hair. "Life is full of dangers. We simply have to take our chances, or dig a hole and stay there. If not for taking chances I wouldn't have *these*." She undid the drawstring on her canvas sack, then removed the bottle-green stone. It sparkled oddly in the firelight. Karl could almost believe that it had power.

"Why do you collect magical objects?" he asked.

Natty shrugged. "They're very useful. Once I had my first — which, as I recall, was a water jug that was always full, though unfortunately my son broke it — I simply had to have more. They're so interesting, though I'm afraid nothing will top this." She hefted the green stone.

"Is that why you're traveling through Woodcutters' Land? Looking for magical objects?"

"Oh, no. My *youngest* son, Melly's father, has gone to sea on a trader. His wife is dead. So I have fetched Melly, and we are going to my home, where I raised my own children. It has not been so bad, this journey." Her face clouded. "Save for tonight's misfor —"

She broke off as the cottage shuddered violently, one of the candles falling from the mantel to the sheepskin. Karl quickly snuffed its flame before it could set the rug on fire, then leapt to the shuttered window.

"Has a great wind come up?" Natty cried, clutching both of Melly's hands tightly. "What is happening?"

Karl had cracked the shutters open an inch, and was peering through the thick and distorting glass. "I'm afraid our friend Hammot is back. I did not really think he would be. He must have

followed our tracks in the snow." He felt sudden anger with himself. "The warmth of the inn must have thawed my soldier's heart a little. I should have considered this."

"He is out there?" Natty was saying. "Did he make the hut shake?"

Karl grimly loaded his pistols. "He must have. He is standing in the pathway with four of his rat things."

The cottage shook again, and Melly whimpered in terror, burying her face against her grandmother's chest. A great booming voice called, "Old woman! I know that you are in the cottage, for I followed your trail. I can sense the power in the objects you carry. Come out! My power is greater now. The moonlight gives me strength! Give me the green stone, or I will shake the hut down around your ears!"

"He's certainly braver than he was before," Karl muttered. "At least he's talked some pep into his rats. I trust you still have no intention of giving him your stone?"

Natty's jaws clenched, and she grunted, "Never! Magician or no magician, he has no right to anything of mine. And I could not do without my stone."

"Well, then, do you have anything in that bag that can help us? Perhaps you can make him disappear or something? Just what does that green stone of yours do, anyway?"

"I can —"

"No, never mind," Karl said, changing his mind. Why should they have to resort to the old woman's magic? Here was a new fight for him, new employment. This was what he looked for as a soldier. "I will go and talk to him."

"Come out!" the voice of the magician boomed, and the cottage rattled, though less violently. Natty looked at Karl and nodded.

"Very well," she said. "We will wait here."

Karl slowly opened the door. His sword was sheathed and his pistols in his belt, though both were in easy reach if he should have need of them.

Hammot stood in the path, his four rats hopping up and down on either side of him, as if in eagerness to be using their spears. The man's face seemed ghastly and pale, despite the warm light emitting from the cabin. He sneered as Karl approached.

"So she has sent you," Hammot said, "her rescuer. I am not so weak as I was a few hours ago, if that is what you think."

"You are a very powerful wizard, are you?" Karl said mockingly.

The thin face grinned. "Yes. A magician of great accomplishment. I came from a poor family, and was never offered the chance to study with any of the masters. Instead, I learned the art of magic from old books I was able to procure, learning with no one to help me. I did it on my own, for I have the *gift*! I can harness the power of the moon, of the night —"

"I have some magic of my own," Karl interrupted, touching the hilt of one of his pistols.

"Simple chemist's tricks!" Hammot scoffed. "I know all about such things. There is no true *power* in it. I *have* the power. Behold these creatures, my greatest creation!" The rats snickered, as if in approval of this comment. "They were once simple cellar rats, and now they have consciousness! I have given them intelligence. Truly you must see the greatness of this feat? Surely you must see that I have a right to that object the old woman possesses?"

Karl sighed with impatience. "If that's your opinion, then I have a right to cut you down if you try and take it."

The magician frowned. "Then you have not brought me the stone? It is still with the old woman."

Karl looked at the rats, then back at the magician. "Why do you want the stone? Why is it so important to you?"

"I gather the trappings of magic about me! That is how I learn. I could *feel* the power in the thing, and the old woman values it highly. It must have a great use, a use I will unlock. She probably does not even know the full scope of its power."

Karl felt his anger building at the presumption of this fellow. "I suggest you take your friends and leave here now. We will not give you the stone!"

He turned and made to stride back to the cottage. Hammot barked one angry command, and two of the rats leapt to bar the soldier's way.

Karl did not need to think. Out came one pistol, and with a bang and a flash one rat fell dead. He pulled the other pistol free with his left hand, but before he could cock it, the second rat knocked it aside with its spear. The weapon slipped from Karl's hand and skidded into the snow. The rat lunged. Karl twisted to one side and grabbed the spear shaft, pulling the rat toward him. The creature was heavier than he had thought, and he suddenly found himself off balance. He fell on his side in the snow with the rat on top of him.

They rolled over and over in the snow. Karl had the rat by the throat with one hand, keeping the snapping teeth back from his face. With the other hand he grabbed a spindly arm and twisted. Bones snapped, and the creature went stiff with pain. Karl threw it off and it thudded against the side of the cottage.

Karl scrambled to his feet, pulling his sword free just as the other two rats bore down on him, spears out-thrust. He leapt back and found his feet touching ice. The fight had brought him around to the side of the cabin, and he had stepped out onto the frozen lake.

The rats came at him from different directions. He chose one as a target and charged it, putting distance between himself and the other. He nimbly avoided a spear thrust, and backhanded his sword at the rat's body. The blade cut cloth, hair and flesh, and the thing flopped onto the ice.

The final rat hesitated, looking from side to side. Karl slowly crossed the ice toward it.

The rat turned and ran. It ran straight for its magician master, who stood on the edge of the lake.

"Useless!" Hammot cried, raising his hand as if to strike his creation. The spear dropped to the ground, and suddenly there was only an ordinary little rat, scuttling free of a bundle of rags, then darting across the ice and snow toward the forest.

"I have evened the score," Karl called from where he stood. "Maybe you should reconsider your position?"

"I think not," the magician hissed. He stepped farther out onto the lake, and the moonlight was full upon him. At that instant he leapt, seeming to fly toward Karl. The soldier was struck before he could move, knocked onto his back, the great sword flying from his hands to clatter away among some boulders rising from the ice.

Hammot scrambled to his feet, and as Karl also tried to drag himself up, he froze, staring in horrified amazement as the magician's teeth grew into long fangs, his hands into barbed claws. The man began to laugh.

Karl's jaw clenched, and he was on his feet, dancing away to where his sword had fallen. The ice was darker among the boulders, thinner, so he hopped along the stones themselves.

Artwork by Elizabeth Hope Shaw

The magician did not see the dark ice.

"I can easily create more rats," he said, voice the same though the face was horribly changed. He wove his way between the boulders.

With a sharp crack, he plunged through the ice, eyes popping open in surprise. He fell to his waist, for the water was not deep, and became stuck there, like a cork in a bottle. A cork that howled in rage.

Karl retrieved his sword and hopped back along the rocks to the magician's side. He swung the sword in a wide arc, slicing Hammot's head from his shoulders. The head bumped along the ice and become tangled in the brush along the shore. The body twitched a few times, then slid away beneath the ice. Karl imagined it left a red stain on the water, but he could not tell. Everything looked silver in the moonlight.

He felt fatigue sink into him as he made his way back to the cottage. In the snow he found his fallen pistol and his hat, which he had not noticed losing. There was, however, no sign of the rat that he had thrown against the wall. Perhaps, he thought, it too had reverted to its natural state.

Back inside the cottage, Natty and Melly were still huddled together in their chair.

"It's safe, now," Karl said, sagging into his own seat. "A surprisingly hard fight. Quite miserable, actually. I was forced to kill the fellow."

Melly had released her grip on her grandmother, and was wiping her face with her new handkerchief. Natty remained where she was, shaking her head sadly. Karl saw that the green stone was still in her lap.

"Just why is this thing so valuable to you?" he asked for the second time. "What does it do?"

The old woman looked at the object with a kind of material love. Then she rose and walked to the hearth where the pot of snow water was now boiling, and probably had been boiling for some time. She dropped the stone in and said, "It is a magical soup stone. It makes soup."

Karl was not sure that he had heard aright. "It ... makes soup?"

"Yes," Natty replied proudly. "The best soup you will ever have. And it will warm your whole body."

Karl stood up, mind whirling, unsure what to think of this revelation. "I fought this battle for a bloody soup stone?"

Melly frowned at her feet, and her grandmother looked wounded. She said, "Well, I can't do without my soup in these cold winters, can I?"

Karl sat back down with a heavy sigh. A soup stone. He could smell the soup already, bubbling over the fire, where once there had just been snow water. It smelled magnificent. A warm, comfortable smell.

"Oh well," he said. "Let's have a bowl, then."

❄

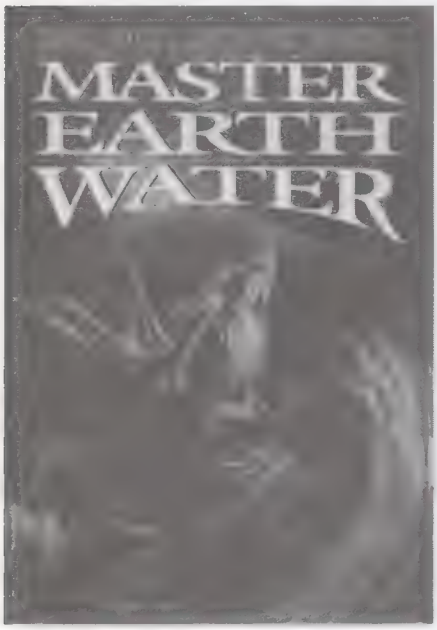
Harold Thompson has been hearing the siren song of the writer's life since he was five years old. When he could resist it no longer, he took a year off from law school to see where writing full time could take him. This is his first fiction sale (he also sold a non-fiction article to *Military Illustrated Past and Present*). The last we heard from him, the year wasn't up yet, so only time will tell whether the world acquires another writer or another lawyer.

Elizabeth Hope Shaw recently made the switch from commercial to fine art. She has been working on a series of miniature pocket classic children's books for Shambhala Publications. She has also studied animation and produced and directed two award-winning animation films while in school.

A subscription blank is on page 64 - don't miss an issue!

An Interview with
Diana L. Paxson and Adrienne Martine-Barnes

by Rachel E. Holmen



I interviewed Diana L. Paxson and Adrienne Martine-Barnes in a three-way telephone call from Greyhaven, Diana's home in Berkeley, in early June 1995.
— Rachel Holmen

A: Ready for my close-up, Mr. DeMille.

R: I guess the first thing I want to do is to ask each of you when you started writing books individually, and then when you started collaborating.

D: Okay. Adrienne, do you want to start?

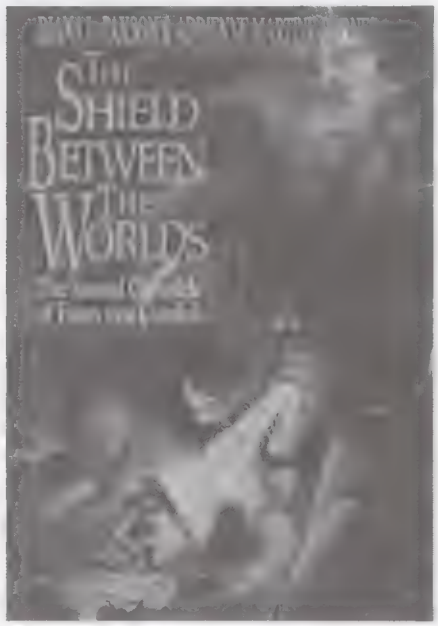
A: I started writing when I was thirteen, after telling myself stories since I was eight. I started writing for publication in 1975, and Diana and I got "married" in 1988. <laughter> We don't actually collaborate, you understand — it's something else. It's a new level in human understanding.

D: Um-huh. Okay, let's see — essentially the same childhood story-telling and writing little bits and pieces. I used to write first chapters and outlines and then put them in the drawer. I took a creative writing course in college which convinced me that I couldn't write, and I didn't do anything for ten years. In 1971, I started writing again and started trying to sell — probably about the same time that Adrienne did. My first short story came out in 1978 and my first novel came out in 1981.

R: Where was the first short story published?

D: In *Asimov's*.

D: When I met Isaac Asimov and said, "Gee, my first story was published by your magazine," he said, "Oh,



that means I can kiss you."

A: Oh God!

R: Isaac was willing to kiss anybody. I don't think he needed an excuse.

A: Diana has a much bigger body of work [than I do] in the short story realm. I, on the other hand, have sold every short story I've ever written. There's six of them!

R: So you wrote short pieces for a while before you turned to longer pieces?

D: Well, no actually —

R: Were you working on them simultaneously?

D: Yes. I started in 1971 with a 90,000-word novel called **THE JEWEL OF FIRE**, which eventually got chopped up into many pieces and "mined" to become the six-book Westria series. So I wrote unsalable juvenile novels for a couple of years, and since I wanted to try selling something, I was also writing short stories.

A: Whereas, a writer I knew essentially convinced me that I couldn't write short stories, and so for years and years I didn't try. He said I didn't have the discipline to write short fiction. Now this is very funny, because I have a letter from Lois McMaster Bujold complimenting me on a story I wrote for one of her anthologies. And a few weeks ago I was talking to Shirley Dickensheet [widow of writer Dean Dickensheet] on the phone about another story, and Shirley said, "Even if I didn't know you, I would think that was probably the best plotted story in the whole collection."

I have two mentors, as far as I'm concerned, in my writing. Fritz Leiber and Marion Zimmer Bradley are the two people that I have known personally who have actually given me input into my work that was significant.

D: My mother happened to be visiting when the galleys for my first short story arrived, and she told me that she thought I should publish under a pseudonym because I might embarrass my father.

A: Well, I have to say that my mother, for all her quirks and twitches, has always been as supportive as she was able. Mother was also a writer, and she read **NEVER SPEAK OF LOVE** in manuscript and her only comment was, "Could you tone down the kinky sex?" Which I thought was a totally reasonable thing, and I said, "No."

R: It's necessary for the plot in that book, yes.

A: She read **WOMEN'S WORK**. Late last year I sent her a manuscript of it —

R: I'm jealous.

A: — and she said, "Adrienne, why hasn't this book been printed?" I said, "Mother, I don't know. It just isn't. My agent can't find anybody who wants to buy my contemporary fiction right now. It'll change, don't worry about it." She said, "But Adrienne, women need to read this book. It's wonderful." Well, it'll happen.

R: Oh, yes, absolutely. That's why I helped you publish **THE CHAMBERED NAUTILUS**. You're going to be one of those writers who's going to have a major cult following. I just want it to happen soon, while it's good for your ego and your income.

A: Well, I think I've got time to enjoy the standard rich-and-famous contract that will be issued to me shortly.

R: Right. <laughter> Anyway, back to Diana. Let's talk some more about how your writing career developed. Who were your influences?

D: Well, I'd certainly have to say Marion, who was kind enough to read my early material and critique it.

A: We'd say that even if we weren't being interviewed by her magazine. <laughter>

D: One of the reasons I actually decided to try to write something again, ten years after being traumatized by the creative writing course, was because I had come to know Marion. It finally dawned on me that she wrote things that people really liked to read that weren't social realism. Which is, presumably, why people liked to read them. That got me going on the idea that maybe it would be worth a try, although with the first attempt, all I wanted to do was finish something. I was carefully not thinking about whether it would be good, much less trying to sell it. It was just, "Finish it." But by the time I got done with it, I had something that had enough reasonable moments — although parts of it were awful — that I was willing to show it to Marion. She looked at it and then gave me an hour or so of scathing criticism, which reduced me to tears, and then I went and rewrote it.

R: I hope that Marion threw in some encouragement.

D: Yes. She said that it was worth working on.

R: Aha. Good.

A: Marion has a gift: a kind of mantle of objectivity that will come upon her. It's very frightening because all of a sudden it's as if she's talking about this total stranger. It's as if she doesn't — on one level — know you any more. I have this page and a half, single-spaced letter that she wrote me after reading the manuscript of **NEVER SPEAK OF LOVE** which is perfect — but it's not like the letter I would get from someone who had been my good friend for twenty years at the time. After I got over my initial shock and my desire to go upstairs, to slit my wrists, and then jump from the second story window — just to make sure! — I wanted to integrate what she said and, really, to treasure as precious her capacity to distance herself from the person and focus entirely on the work. That is the mark of a true professional.

D: So, for a couple of years, everything I wrote, I would take to her to critique. Then I had a couple of other people, who represented the common reader, that I would show everything to. Tracy, my sister-in-law, who was my agent for many years, was very, very helpful in that. She would say, "What happens next? Get the next chapter done, I want to know what happens." When you're starting out, especially, it's very important to know that somebody actually cares if you ever write another word. Then there are various writers that I admired. I'm not sure I was influenced by some of them. I mean, I admire Tolkien tremendously, but I don't work in that way at all. Probably, especially in terms of what I'm doing now, Rosemary Sutcliff and Mary Renault would be major models.

R: Marion, I know, is also a great admirer of Mary Renault. And when I read Sutcliff's **SWORD AT SUNSET**, I was just blown away.

Oh, we should probably explain to the readers that your sister-in-law Tracy is the wife, or was at that time the wife, of Marion's younger brother Paul, who is a writer of fantasy novels also.

D: Yes. Paul Edwin Zimmer, who has collaborated with Marion on a couple of things.

R: Has he collaborated with you on anything?

D: Not — officially. There was this novel which — let's see. Paul had originally come up with the idea, and at that point he was writing even more slowly than he does now. He didn't do anything with the idea, so he turned it over to Don [Studebaker, Diana's husband, who writes as Jon DeCles], and Don wrote it as a short novel which didn't sell. So, a number of years later, Chris Miller [at Avon Books] was looking for some more material and we said, "Hey, gee, there's this novel which was called **VELVET SCIMITAR** and we could do something with that;" we could do it as a collaboration and Paul could work on it again.

So Paul was supposed to go back through it and add 30,000 words and a bunch of fight scenes. Well, by the time he got through with it, it had lost 10,000 words and he hadn't noticed because he wasn't doing word counts as he went along.

So I took a look at it and said, "Okay, the easiest way to lengthen the story is to add another point-of-view character. So why don't we put in a bunch of scenes from the point of view of the young man who gets sort-of adopted." Because, among other things, he survives the end of the book! This will make it a little more cheerful, since the hero of this book is dying of what sounds like stomach cancer through most of the book. The original was really gloomy — even without the battles.

R: This is escape literature, mind you, that we're writing here.

D: Right. Yeah. Sure. So I went prancing through it and wrote in a bunch of stuff — and also put in a bunch of things in the scenes that were set on the ocean because neither Paul nor Don had ever been anywhere near a boat. I don't know that much, but I'd just been researching it for **THE SEA STAR**, so

at least I knew some terminology.

A: You knew the aft from the foredeck.

D: Yeah. So I played around with it and we eventually managed to lengthen it out to a reasonable size. It came out as **THE BLOOD OF COLIN MUIR**, and all I asked was that they put in the beginning that they dedicate it "To Diana, without whom this book could not have been written." It came out as a collaboration between Paul and Don. But I figured a triple collaboration was just not going to fly.

R: I know Marion has mentioned that Paul comes in and helps her improve the fight scenes in her books because of his knowledge of fighting and armor and weaponry.

So, Diana, what was the first thing you and Adrienne collaborated on?

A: We never got up one morning and said, "Gee, I've got a barn — let's have a show." Chris Miller wanted to do a book about Fionn mac Cumhal. She generated the idea.

D: And dug up a lot of the research material, which was very handy.

A: It was in 1988.

D: You had come up with an idea for a science fiction collaboration —

A: — which we never really got around to.

D: Well, my publishers didn't like it. But Chris was saying, "Oh, gee, won't somebody please write about Fionn", and I was saying, "Well, I've got this other stuff contracted to you, so I can't do it."

A: So it was decided that I could do the first draft and then Diana could come in and do the second draft.

D: And it would save all this time!

A: That was cool, because I needed to sell something and Diana was interested in the project but she just didn't want to over-commit herself. Then, when we looked at it, we realized it wasn't one book. There was no way to cram all this material into one book — it had to be more books than one. So then we were looking at a trilogy, and that's what we ended up doing. I don't remember us ever having any serious disagreements.

D: Uh-uh.

A: I mean, as collaborations go, it was fairly smooth. I would stick in parenthetical comments —

D: Oh, yeah. The rough drafts were classic!

A: — that were scandalous and scurrilous and unprintable and —

R: Gee, it's too bad we can't get this on CD-ROM.

D: Yeah, well, I had to go through pretty carefully and make sure I took out all those. Occasionally, one of them would reach Chris, and she would have to take it out.

A: I still have the back-up disk of the unedited-by-you draft. So I can reconstruct them if I have to.

D: I remember the point at which Fionn and Donait first get together, as I recall. At this point in the draft, Adrienne had gotten them into bed and then it stops and there's this comment that — what exactly was the thing about? "After world-class sex, what do they say? Do they stop and have a cigarette and decide what to name the first kid?"

A: That's what I wrote.

D: Anyway, so that definitely added to the enjoyment.

A: Or I would come to this point, when I would write, "Diana, there needs to be a terrific poem here" — because I don't do poetry and she was in charge of all the verse.

D: I was in charge of poetry and sex.

<much laughter>

R: That's not bad.

A: I would come up with these really off the wall things, like the geas that Sadb is under in the second book — that didn't come from anywhere, it just happened. It really made the story stand up, and Diana said, "Oh, that's nice! I like that."

D: Actually, despite the hassle of being involved with two different trilogies at the same time, the fact that Adrienne did the first draft for the first Fionn book was a life-saver for me, because as it turns out, the boyhood stories of Fionn and Sigfrid are extremely similar — both are brought up in the wilderness by strange characters, have famous fathers, identity crises, etc. If I had drafted the first Fionn book I would have ended up writing the same story twice. But Adrienne's approach to this kind of material was quite different from mine.

R: I'm reading **SERPENT'S TOOTH**, Diana's novelization of the Lear tale. Of course, I know the Lear tale — the bare bones of it. What's neat is to see the way you flesh out the story with things that make it probable. Presumably this is where the geas came from. It's like, "Okay, why does this work? Why would these people do this? Ah! Okay, if we posit this, all the other pieces start to fall into place."

A: She's really very good at that.

D: The major problem with these ancient traditional tales is often motivation. When it was a traditional tale, apparently nobody ever worried about why anybody was doing anything, because "my grandmother said that's how it happened so that's the way it happened". But for a modern novel, people are going to wonder why on earth anybody would get themselves into that situation.

R: I always thought it was like the scientific thing of "the proof is left as an exercise for the reader". You're supposed to go back and mull over the motivations in your life as you're pushing the plow or washing the dishes or diapering the baby.

A: The intent of oral tradition, as far as I'm concerned, is to produce a teach-text for knowing where you ought to be in your local community. It was entertainment, but if you look at a folktale, it always tells you something about the relation of the individual to the community. The novel as a separate form is about two hundred years old, and before that what we had for authenticating text was drama. The shift from the 18th century to our present day literature has become the manufacture of authenticating texts. **LITTLE WOMEN** has been an authenticating text for five generations of American girls now. The change is that in order to produce an authenticating text, you have to give people reasons for doing things that in previous periods they did out of custom — because custom was breaking down. As Carolyn Heilbron says in **WRITING A WOMAN'S LIFE**, "We live our life in texts." We model ourselves from literature on television, literature in the movies, literature in books. We say, "No, no, that's entertainment. We don't really act like that." But the fact of the matter is, we model ourselves on the examples that are around us.

R: Of course.

A: When I started **THE FIRE SWORD**, I had no intention of writing a series, but I found that I was involved in a multi-generational saga, about the relationships between the various generations, and lots of serious dysfunctionality, and the next thing I knew, I had to write three more books — there is actually a fifth book, **THE SWORD IN THE TREE**, but Avon decided they didn't want it, so my small

but rabid following is frustrated and will eventually foment a revolution, storm the offices of Hearst Enterprises, and hold John Douglas hostage until they agree the buy the final book. Only it isn't, because there are a total of twenty-eight novels set in the same alternate earth that the Sword books are in, some of which may some day be written.

I am fascinated by families, especially by mother and daughter dyads. One of the sad things about **THE SWORD IN THE TREE** not getting sold is that we don't get to see Eleanor as an old woman, dealing with her daughter Rowena, her granddaughter Orphiana, and her great grand-daughter Anna, before all of them, with Anna's brother Roderick go off to Iceland and finish the Chronicle. I work out a lot of my own material with my mom and grandmothers through the medium of my writing.

R: What about your current projects?

A: At present I am completing a contemporary novel, **SURVIVORS**, which, again, is about the mother/daughter dyad — this is a drive-by shooting of a book. I don't think anything I have ever done is so relentless. I have started a science fiction series, **RUINS OF EMPIRE**, and another, **NIGHT'S ARMIES**, both of which are extremely interesting to me and I hope, to others. I have about ten projects in some stage of development — three more fantasies — **FIRELANDS**, **THUNDERLANDS**, and **DARKLANDS** set in the same universe at the Sword books — the first one is about the Japanese trying to manage the Aztecs (Firelands)! Go figure. I have a very strange take on a lot of things.

One of my most profound motivations as a writer is to try to figure out new texts, and this means I do a great deal of experimentation, which is not always marketable — which I accept as just part of the job.

R: Diana, what are some of your other books, outside your collaborations with Adrienne?

D: Although it doesn't appear in my bibliography, I had the privilege of working with Marion on **THE FOREST HOUSE**. Right now we're getting going on another book, **FORESTS OF AVALON**, which will fill in some of the period in between **FOREST HOUSE** and **MISTS OF AVALON**.

After many years of refusing to tackle the Arthurian story in its own right (although I did Tristan and Iseult in **WHITE RAVEN**), I finally realized that I do in fact have something new to say about the material, which is to include the point of view of the Anglo-Saxons and some of the other ethnic groups then in Britain. A story about one of them, the Sarmatians who were Roman auxiliaries, just came out in the anthology **EXCALIBUR**. Interestingly enough, the background for that one came from some articles in Adrienne's files which had originally been sent to her by her ex-husband the archaeologist. I've worked up a proposal for a book to be called **HALLOWED ISLE** which my agent is now marketing. I'll be going to England to do more research for it at the end of the summer.

Research is obviously an important part of my writing. I do a lot at the Cal. Library, and I get a lot from visiting the sites where action in the story happens. And, although it was not in fact started for that purpose, the Society for Creative Anachronism has been very useful. Whatever you need to know about early technology, from falconry to ironsmithing, there is someone in the SCA who can demonstrate it.

R: Didn't you help found the SCA?

D: I am more or less the originator, since the whole thing grew out of a tournament that I threw in my backyard in 1966. I was one of the core group that developed it into a real organization, and served on the Board of Directors for the first ten years. Since then I have maintained a relationship of detached beneficence. It is hard to do full time SCA and full time writing — they take too much of the same kind of energy. It was through the SCA that I first met Adrienne, actually. She had been one of the major figures in organizing the Kingdom of the East, and then moved out here.

R: We're out of time, so thank you both, and I hope the Fionn series is a huge success!

❄

The Results of the Cauldron

Stories:

- 1st Place: **"Spaces" by Edwina Mayer**
- 2nd Place: **"A Little Night Music" by Dorothy Heydt**
- 3rd Place: **"Buttermilk Pancakes" by Peter Greene**

Artwork:

- 1st Place: **George Barr for "Spaces"**
- 2nd Place: **David A. Cherry for "Pot of Dreams"**
- 3rd Place: **Alan Gutierrez for "The Aluka"**

Congratulations to all the winners! To vote for your favorites in *this* issue, use the ballot on page 64. Your interest and enthusiasm mean a lot to us at *FANTASY* Magazine.

Letters

FINDING LORD DUNSANY

Julie Brodsky, Lafayette, CA

In your "MZB Talks to Writers", you gave a list of books and/or authors whom you consider essential to the authors' repertoire. Some of these books, however, are not readily available. For example, the Berkeley Library has six books by Lord Dunsany. Five of these are anthologies, while the sixth is a nonfiction history of Ireland. I am really curious, however, about a topic that hasn't been discussed yet: how to make your hero confused. It is essential to the plot of nearly every story that the hero be confused, otherwise there is no hurdle to overcome. The hero either has to figure out a religious problem, or find the villain who murdered his family, or some other brain twister.

The majority of Lord Dunsany's stories are shorter than novel length, so you probably aren't missing much or his work if you've found five anthologies. I'll consider your suggestion about a column on "character confusion". —MZB

OFFENSIVE FOOLS?

Ed O'Brien, Titusville, NJ

I was disappointed with your well-written story "Fool's Fire". It doesn't take long to figure out who the fools are: they're Christians. The references to "the Good Books" and to praying and fasting as responses to demonic evil are unmistakable. Christians are depicted as dolts: ignorant and closed-minded people who, narrowly, think they know what is best for everyone. Three times you point this out, and say not one good thing about these "glum-looking people" who of course speak bad English, while Lythande speaks flawlessly and in humble, wise, and authoritative "murmurs".

Really, Mrs. Bradley, some of your readers might find your tale offensive. We're not all pagans out here. We object to people of our faith being shown as evil, ignorant, and miserable; while pagans are depicted as good, wise, and happy.

As a pledging member of my Christian Church, I resent the implication that it is necessary to be a Christian in order to be a fool or a bigot. The characters in the story "Fool's Fire" were modelled after real people I knew when I lived in Texas — hence the dialect. Lythande speaks "flawlessly" because it is very distracting to have your protagonist speak in dialect unless that feature is significant to the plot. It is true that the people who were the inspiration for this story were Christians, but they were also many, many other things. If you wish to stake the entire reputation of Christianity on the behavior of this small subset, that is certainly your right, but it was not my intention in writing the story. —MZB

TWO MORE OPINIONS ON PEN NAMES

Varda One (Varda R. Murrell), Hawthorne, CA

In your statement on pen names you invited other reasons for using them.

I've always felt names were magic — if you were called by the wrong name, it profoundly affected your life. "Rumpelstiltskin" sent shivers down my spine. I couldn't explain it when I was little, I just intuited it. That's why I felt it imperative to change my own first name, which I knew was wrong for me. All through childhood, I was on the lookout. When I was fifteen, I heard it, immediately recognized it, and adopted it. Later, I chose a surname that would further my desires [as a journalist]: "One" reminds me that I am part of a whole and that I must live in harmony with myself, my fellow beings, and the planet. The reason I haven't legalized it is because of the hassle. My pen name is an affirmation and based on strength, not shame or scorn or sexism. When I use it, I tell the deepest truth of who I am.

John Betancourt, Newark, NJ

In response to your editorial in the latest FANTASY Magazine, I can think of another legitimate reason to avoid using pseudonyms: not giving in to outside pressure.

In 1990, after my second SF novel had been published and had vanished without a trace, my editor told me he wouldn't be able to publish another novel by me under my own name because of the sales figures. If I'd wanted to keep writing for him, I'd have to use a pseudonym. In today's mail I received proof that publishing does not necessarily punish the obstinate who stick to their real names: advance copies of not one, but two of my forthcoming novels. More authors, like you, and more editors, like you, should stick to their guns where pseudonyms are involved for no good reason.

Fashions in pen names change over the years. At one time the most popular reason may have been to have a name that "matched" the popular conception of a genre. Looking over our slushpile, I would say that the most popular source today is a confusion between the roles of author and character, between life and story. Authors are "naming" themselves with the same types of names they are giving their characters — fanciful heroic things with deliberately twisted spellings, like "Aryelle Sylverfyre" — and then either putting themselves into their stories or trying to live their stories out in their lives. This may make good therapy, but it generally makes bad fiction. —HRJ

FANTASY Magazine Talks to Writers: Tackling Your First Short Story

by Ann Sharp

An earlier version of this column appeared in the Darkover Newsletter, issue #33.

The idea of creating your own fantasy story seems to be irresistibly attractive to people who are word-oriented and like to write. They're the ones we hear from, of course! And maybe you're one of them, and when you've read a magazine's submission guidelines, a story idea really attracts you.

Well, go ahead. Write the story that you think *should* have happened. Write every single thing that occurs to you, every thing that happened to your hero, your heroine, your villain. Only then, and not before, do I want you to look at the rest of this column.

Once you have your story on paper, with all the details, then go back and edit it. Do that by checking for several things in the body of the story.

Do you know from first hand experience or sound research — preferably from original sources — about the place your story is set? I once read a story with a short scene laid in a prison. Even in four paragraphs, it was painfully obvious that the author had never been near one. If your story is laid in the Sahara, it would probably be a very good idea to read, say, a U.S. Army desert survival manual, preferably dating from World War II or even World War I. If you're writing about noble ladies of lengthy pedigree and high standards of behavior, find a second hand instruction book for charm school students. The standards taken for granted there are no longer with us; they have been downgraded by feminists and discarded as inefficient by working women, but they will add a very realistic touch to your characters.

Are the characters believable? Are they three dimensional, a little flawed? A minor character flaw here is an asset. Isn't a cat more sympathetic if he's slightly klutzy, for instance? If the author describes the heroine as beautiful, the reader has to believe it. If the author describes the heroine as being charming and sincere, however, the heroine had better speak and act and be reacted to as a charming and sincere person. In fact, the author could make better use of space on the page by *showing* the girl's charm while moving the action forward.

Speaking of action, where did the story *start*? Did you write thirty five pages of background material, introducing the biographies of six people? (I can't resist this myself.) The story should start, as someone described it, on "the day things were different." Those thirty five pages served a useful purpose for **you** — you got acquainted with your characters. But any paragraph of description you have in the story is stopping the action, and in a short story you don't have any space on the page to waste. To edit this, choose the deftest bits, the ones that *really* hit off your characters neatly. Then slip them into the action as unobtrusively as possible, so they won't halt that forward moving action. Be sparing of adjectives. Too many writers seem to feel that since adjectives don't cost anything, the more the better. Not true. A better approach is to use your thesaurus to find the *one* word that conveys *exactly* what you want to. Only include it then if it moves the story forward. Otherwise, no.

Have a friend read the story. **You** may remember why the hero's boots appeared in the jeweler's shop, covered in a mysterious grey powder, but it's possible that you edited that bit out in doing all the revisions I've been recommending! A second opinion is helpful to be sure all functional details are in place.

Finally, when you have the elements of your plot where you want them, *then* read again for grammar and sentence structure and spelling.

Is any sentence not clear? Rewrite it.

Are most of the sentences active, or are they passive? "You are loved by me, darling," never won fair lady!

Does every other word have five syllables? Switch from Latin derivatives to Anglo Saxon. The audience has to understand you, not the other way around.

Are your spelling, and your grammar, and your punctuation, and your style, as unobtrusive as they can possibly be? Different editors have different quirks: mine is the careless use of one or two word combinations starting with any, every, all, or some. MZB's pet peeve is that the mixed up use of lay and lie grates on her eye like fingernails on a blackboard. Again, the problem here is that errors of

grammar, usage, and punctuation stop the action of your story just as much as those thirty five pages of biography and description. You can lose all the momentum of the climax of your thrilling chase or approaching horror or steamy love scene if the reader is puzzling out what you really intended to say, instead of panting with excitement to find out what will happen next. That's the last thing you want.

Did I mention before that a short story is so short that you have to keep the action moving, or did you pick that up from the subtle hints?

When your story is this polished, type a neat double spaced manuscript in a conventional style on 8 1/2" by 11" paper. Don't get creative with this part; that does **not** make a favorable impression. Here, too, be unobtrusive.

Then send it in. You will have done the very best you can, and an editor really does appreciate that. Make the effort to be sure that nothing comes between your original brilliant shining idea behind the page and the reader.

In case you read the rest of this column before you wrote your story:

Okay, now. **Get going**, and **good luck**!

— Ann Sharp

Ann Sharp has edited the Darkover Newsletter since Issue 23, with the assistance of Hastur and Cassilda, her Balinese cats. She vents her dismay/annoyance/ire/fury at authors' and editors' carelesness/ignorance/apathy by writing about writing. All examples, however hideous, were originally dumb mistakes made by professional/commercial writers/editors!

Writers Talk Back:
The Next Time You Feel Sorry For Yourself...

by Barbara Rosen

As I write this, I am on my way to an evening church service, where I shall serve as cantor and soloist. The round trip, to church and back, will take a full two hours and I shall not be paid. Nevertheless, I am only too delighted to have this opportunity to make good music with a superb accompanist. It is a goal towards which I have worked for most of my adult life.

The next time you feel sorry for yourself, the next time a manuscript comes back with nothing to show for your postage but a form rejection, I hope you'll stop to consider how fortunate you are.

Writing is a solitary activity. You can do it at your convenience, in the location of your choice. (For me, at this moment, that means "on a clipboard on my knee, on the subway".) It costs next to nothing to write. Even if you hire a professional typist, as I do, and buy postage to mail your manuscripts out, writing is one of the cheapest hobbies you can find. Best of all, you can do it — and keep on doing it — even if nobody likes your stuff. As a writer, you get to practice your craft.

Performing artists aren't so lucky.

A serious contender in the performing arts spends years refining his skills, invests thousands of dollars in private lessons and group workshops. Sometimes expensive equipment, such as a musical instrument, must be purchased as well.

And after all that, there's still the question of "breaking in" — waiting all day in a mob of other hopefuls for a chance to audition, trying to find an agent. Looking for work.

During this time, there is no opportunity to actually use the skill the performer is trying to peddle. Actors, musicians, and dancers cannot work in a vacuum: they need other performers. And if no other performers are available, the frustration can be intense.

I know.

As I close, I am on my way home from my church service. It was a holiday weekend, so only eleven people attended — ten, if you don't count me.

The music went very well; I had fun. The rows of empty pews didn't change that. I got to use my craft tonight: I got to sing.

But I can write any old time.

And so can you.

Artwork by Lisa and Jonathan Hunt

Even More than Magic

by Bob Dennis

The twin daughters of the sorceress Eosina sat manacled together, back to back in the sun. They'd been trading places in each other's shade until the guards ordered them to be still, leaving Quanti on the sun side. Thera thought about her sister's pale castle-kept skin turning red. Her own coloring changed with the seasons and right now was late summer brown.

She watched the guards playing war for her and Quanti's belongings. The older guard had half an ear on the left which he kept rubbing on his shoulder. He was cheating, but the younger guard didn't notice because he kept staring at Quanti with wolf eyes. The sisters were worth more untouched, and he was clearly disappointed with that arrangement.

Their horses, tethered in the scrub pine at the camp outskirts, pawed nervously, sending a cloud of red dust into a blue sky. The young guard glanced above his cards.

"Just the wind," Half-Ear said as he judged the meager pot of copper pieces, borage seeds, and a charm crafted from mother-of-pearl in the shape of a dolphin. The charm, said to allow the wearer to breathe beneath the sea on a full moon, belonged to Quanti.

Thera was the bearer of the more mundane magic: herbs and roots. This had been Eosina's choice, not Thera's.

Artwork by Lisa and Jonathan Hunt

Since their earliest lessons Eosina had sent them down separate paths of learning. On one birthday when Quanti had received a silver wand, Thera unwrapped yet another book with pictures of plants and long lists of remedial decoctions and infusions. She threw the book to the floor and started to cry, but her mother silenced her.

"Your sister has the sorceress style, Thera," Eosina told her. "The arm-waving and incantations suit her better. This kind of magic," she said, picking up the book and putting it back in Thera's hand, "is more down to earth, like you. Believe me, there is as much power in learning knowledge of the natural world as the supernatural one."

And so while Eosina and Quanti were ensconced in the top of the castle tower reciting Latin backwards, Thera explored the meadows and forest. She didn't understand why Quanti was taught the tower magic while she was sent outdoors. She thought it was unfair. She saw no difference between her and Quanti. They were twins. Through the years she'd grown a hair taller, a shade darker, but that was only from being outside so much. Of course, there were advantages to what she'd learned. For instance, at least the guards knew the worth of her seeds. Strength for a soldier when placed under the tongue, borage bringeth courage, went the old herbal rhyme.

But neither of their talents had prevented capture by the sorcerer Scarazon's men. Eosina had warned them to stay north of Scarazon's holdings, but the sorcerer had men secretly peppered across all lands, waiting like trapdoor spiders for the sisters. Since as early as she could remember, Thera had not heard Scarazon's name uttered without a curse. From pestilential spells to demon hordes, Eosina had turned all Scarazon's attacks back to his dark and fetid lands. He was envious of Eosina's magic. He hated her white marble castle. Sometimes the storms that raged around his fortress would break long enough for him to see it shining in the north like a star. He wanted the magic contained in that northern star and he hit upon Eosina's daughters as the way to get it.

He knew the sisters would be on their sixteenth-year journey-test and he planned to capture and ransom them for Eosina's magic. The trap was sprung in a narrow mountain pass with no chance to flee or fight. The guards had cut a lock of hair from the sisters' heads and burned it in a magical signal fire. Scarazon was coming for them.

Thera heard Quanti whispering to herself. "Aurum, oleum, lutum, malum, telum, velum. Velum."

"What are you up to?" Thera asked.

"Fio, fieri, quiet, I'm thinking. Third person singular. Indicative or subjunctive? No, imperative. Iron become veil. Fite. Ready?"

"For what?"

"A little spell to get us out of these manacles," Quanti answered.

Where would that get them, Thera wondered. They needed a big spell. "Why don't you just wave your arms and portare promptus us out of here?" she asked.

Quanti grimaced at Thera's bad Latin. "Powerful magic like that takes time, and I don't think the guards would let me stand up and start weaving a spell." She jangled the cold iron around their wrists to remind Thera.

"First things first, I suppose," Thera said.

"Ferrum fite velum," Quanti whispered. There was a warm tingling around their wrists as the manacles turned into a delicate silk veil. They unwrapped it, watching the guards. A breeze brought the foul scent of two men who had spent too much time in the mountains and not enough time in a mountain stream.

Thera wrinkled her nose. "Now turn them into the animals they are, pigs."

"Too complicated. I can't do it without a spell book."

"What about a distraction so we can slip away?" Thera asked.

Quanti looked over at their horses. She moved her hand to the sand and drew a sinuous line in it. She hissed quietly and the line turned into a little green snake that took off towards the horses.

Before long they were neighing and setting back against their ties. "That's not just the wind," the young guard said and he slapped down his cards. He started over to the horses.

Quanti frowned when she saw that Half-Ear wasn't moving. "Now what?"

The whole journey-test had been the same, Thera thought. Quanti's magic

Artwork by Lisa and Jonathan Hunt

only took them halfway to where they wanted to go. The rest of the way was up to her and was invariably the hard part. A quick spell to start a fire on a rainy night while Thera built a shelter. A magic show for dinner in a tavern, but in between towns Thera hunted and cooked. One guard led away with a trick, the other Thera would have to deal with.

Well, she was the fighter growing up. While Quanti was with Mother practicing painting magic runes on her fingernails and plaiting her hair in invisibility braids, Thera had the run of the castle. Many a day was spent attacking the parapet guards with a spoon and kettle lid taken from the kitchen.

Before long the guards were giving her tips on fighting. As she grew older they put weapons in her hands and trained her as if she were a prince. The lessons were like directions for casting a spell: stand sideways to make a narrower target, crouch low for power thrusts, on your toes for parry, in close fighting shield in like a tortoise shell, in open field it circles like a ring.

Sometimes a cloud of purple smoke would billow from the tower window, or a storm of bats would shriek into the sky, and Thera would wish she was part of their magic. But weaponry had a power of its own, unlike herbal remedies or even Mother's spells and Thera learned the fighting arts as well as the healing arts. It seemed to her a natural balance. One moment she would nick an opponent in sword sparring, the next she would bind his wound with a shepherd's purse poultice.

Thera's mother knew about the lessons with the castle guards, but said nothing of it until the day Thera and Quanti were to leave on their journey-test.

"Your sister lacks certain strengths needed in the world beyond these walls," she told Thera. "I want you to protect Quanti." Those words confirmed in Thera's heart what she had feared for many years: that Mother loved her less than Quanti. She wanted her to guard Quanti. The favorite one, the special one. Thera willed the tears burning on the edge of her eyes not to roll down her cheeks.

"You have taught Quanti your most precious magic." Thera spoke as if a knife were against her throat. "What have you given me?"

"You have even more," Mother had replied. Last, half-heard words before Thera marched out, slamming the chamber door with its bas-relief, ember-eyed demon guards.

Thera heard the young guard searching the camp edge, stabbing his sword into thick manzanita brush and jumping around trees yelling, "Aha!" She watched the fat one. His back was to her. He was picking the face cards out of his partner's hand and replacing them with deuces and threes. She could probably jump him, but with what? She picked up the veil and twisted it into a rope. Maybe I can learn a trick from Quanti, Thera thought. She slid her body to the ground, knees and hips and elbows moving in slow arcs across the sand. The sand was hot through her clothes and she wondered briefly how snakes went around on their bare bellies.

The guard's back was soon within reach. She checked the sun to make sure her shadow would not fall across his sight, then rose up on her knees, the veil stretched between her hands. The sight of his half ear, sunburnt and peeling, disgusted her. She dropped the veil over his head, pulled and twisted.

He jumped up, pulling her off her feet, but she held on. He spun in a circle and pried his fingers at the silk biting into his neck. Thera felt her grip slipping. "Velum fite ferrum," she said. Nothing. The guard was swinging one arm behind him, hitting her in the ribs. "Velum fite ferrum," she gasped. Nothing, why didn't it work? The guard dropped to his knees and reached over his head, grabbing Thera's wrists. She put her knee in his back. "Velum fite ferrum," she yelled. Nothing, but the guard's hold released and he went face over into the sand.

"To reverse a spell you say it backwards, Thera," Quanti said, running over to her. Behind her, the other guard was charging back, his sword drawn.

"Get away," Thera ordered as she picked up the dead guard's sword. It was a heavy, rough piece and she'd have to two-hand it. Quanti was braiding her hair as fast as her fingers could go. Thera popped a handful of borage seeds in her mouth and turned sideways to meet her attacker.

The guard swung at her with a heavy downstroke, his speed and weight behind it. All Thera could do was get her sword up for a block. The clanging blow buckled her knees, but she managed to roll to his backhand side and get her sword up again without seeing, but knowing a cross cut was coming. It did and she used it to knock her out of his sword's reach. At least his charge had been broken.

She spared a quick glance at Quanti who started to disappear as she finished her braid. At least she was safe, Thera thought. She wished Mother had taught her that trick, but then she'd cut her own hair off so it wouldn't get snagged hiking through thick forest or in her fighting lessons. She wondered what Quanti would do now that she was invisible. If she tried something with the guard she might get caught in the swordplay.

The guard was circling Thera, breathing hard. *Where are you, Quanti*, Thera wondered. She saw something move in the sand behind the guard. A circle was being drawn in the sand. What was Quanti up to? Would she call demons from the earth to help?

The guard moved in closer. Thera brought her sword up, elbows bent and braced against her chest. *Conserve my arm strength*, she thought. The guard slashed out at her. Left, right, left, right. Simple work to block, but the power behind the strokes was breaking Thera's arms. He meant to cut her down, like chopping at a tree, eventually she would fall. He paused, sweat dripping from the tip of his nose.

Artwork by Lisa and Jonathan Hunt

Behind him the circle was completed and now an arrow was being drawn, pointing at the circle. More magic from Quanti, but Thera was grateful for it. She had never felt a bond with her sister, but the power of knowing she was not alone rose in her. It started in her heart and spread to her arms like a fire and her sword came up. She called upon the incantations of steel she had learned from Mother's castle guards and charged. The guard stepped back, surprised. Thera fought like a scorpion, stinging thrusts from her center, crossing slashes from the sides. The guard retreated from the attack, his mouth grim, his eyes wide with disbelief. *Where are your wolf eyes now?*, Thera wondered. She forced him to the edge of the circle where the sand began to run from under his heels. The circle became a black pit. With one last thrust Thera drove him into it. A rushing wind pulled at her as the whole sky seemed to bend towards the pit. The guard did

not fall but was pulled into the pit, stretched piece by piece. The last was his mouth, turned into a long silent oval.

Thera fell to her knees. Her arms felt like molten lead was coursing through her veins. Quanti appeared beside her, her hair coming free of the braid.

"I thought you were possessed by a warrior spirit the way you went after him," she said.

"Thanks, that's a scary bit of work too," Thera replied, looking into the pit.

"It's a portal spell, but I didn't have time to think of a place to send him. I really don't know where he went."

A shadow crossed the two and they looked up. A thundercloud was building in the sky over their heads. The base was gray and moved like a sack full of snakes. It boiled into the sky, dark blues and purples pounding against each other like two fighting seas.

Higher up was wave after wave of black breaking against the sky, washing over the sunlight. With a crack of thunder that shook the earth, two yellow eyes opened in the thundercloud. The sorcerer Scarazon looked down upon the sisters.

Thera picked up the sword. She did not know what she could do with a sword against a sorcerer, but it felt good in her hand.

Thera said, "Quanti? Do you think we could —"

"Do you think I can't hear your peeping, my pretty birds?" The sorcerer's voice was like steel scraped on slate. It grated on the sisters' ears and raised the hair on the back of their necks. "I can feel your little hearts fluttering for your mother. She cannot help you here. You shouldn't have left your cage. Eosina took a big chance doubling her one daughter, now she'll have to pay twice as much for you."

While Scarazon crackled and boomed, Thera whispered to Quanti, "One daughter, what is he talking about?"

"I don't know Thera, but when I say jump, jump."

"Maybe that's what I'll trade you two for, your mother's doubling spell. It should apply as well to an army as to a baby girl," Scarazon said.

Quanti closed her eyes and said, "Recipe Nos Domum Jump!" They jumped. Lightning chased them as they fell. Thera had the sensation of sinking through warm water. She looked up and thought she saw a black spider descending upon her head. She tried to yell, but light came out of her mouth. The sword was still in her hand, but she could not move her arm. Then the sisters were landing on the copper-laced green flagstones of their mother's tower chamber. They rolled to the walls, escaping a giant black hand that reached down from the vaulted ceiling.

Thera saw her mother standing on her spell dais just like the day she had stormed out. The color of her hair always reminded Thera of a raven's wing and her eyes were like green ice. She wore so many rings on her fingers that her hands looked to be made of gold and jewels rather than flesh and bone. "Scarazon, leave them be," she said, but it was more a request than an order.

The hand groped about the room, feeling along the floor with pointed nails of obsidian that scratched the flagstones. "Do something, Mother," Quanti cried out.

"I cannot, Quanti. You opened a door for him, it is an invitation. My powers are useless against a guest."

"Claude nunc, claude nunc, claude nunc," Quanti incanted, shaking her fists against the hole in the ceiling.

A yellow eye opened in the palm of the hand and within the black pupil opened a mouth. "You cannot close a door when someone is in it, you bad-mannered girl," the mouth said. "Did you think I couldn't chase you down your little hole?" The hand turned, the eye surveyed the chamber, the mouth smiled. "And look who's here. Mother rabbit."

The eye looked covetously at the stacks of spell books, the pyritized dragon-skull mortar, the pink tourmaline wand. "Take them, but leave me my girls," Eosina said.

These were the things Thera had always wanted. In her mind the measure of her mother's love was her magic, and Quanti received most of that. But now she realized that she had been all wrong about that. Mother would relinquish her magic for both of them.

Scarazon laughed. "You can have your girls for the spell that made them."

Thera didn't want to hear anymore. *Quanti may have invited him in, but I didn't*, she thought. And Mother's magic may be useless, but the only time steel was useless was when it was in a scabbard. She stepped up behind the hand, raised her sword and swung through the wrist. Mostly the blade moved as if through air, but somewhere in the middle the blade caught and snicked through something. The forearm turned to smoke, spiraling upward and disappearing through the portal with a small scream. A hand dropped to the floor. It was small and old. The knuckles were knobby, the nails twisted and yellow, the skin pale with blotches of rust. Scarazon's hand stripped of its magic.

"Claude nunc," Quanti said once more and the hole in the ceiling closed up, replaced by smoke-stained rafters.

"That should teach him the difference between a rabbit hole and a badger hole," Thera said.

Eosina stepped down from her dais and gathered her daughters under each arm. Thera pulled away. "I understand now," she said. "Quanti is your real daughter. I am a spell, a mirror image conjured up to look after her."

Eosina reached out and grabbed Thera's hand. "No, you are no less a daughter than Quanti."

"But Scarazon said you only had one."

"That is true, sixteen years ago I had one daughter, but you are both her. I knew Scarazon would try to take her on her journey-test and that she couldn't learn enough in sixteen years to fight him. So I used my most powerful magic and turned one daughter into two. I thought if I divided what you needed to know you could learn twice as much. You could be allies with a chance against Scarazon. It worked, but at what cost? Thera, I love you the same, but I could not treat you the same. I am sorry."

Light filled the chamber through the tower's single, narrow, arched window. The window overlooked the castle walls and beyond to the forest where Thera had gathered herbs. The place really was like a cage, Thera thought. Up in the tower was a sorceress's place, though. Quanti could have that, Thera decided, because she had even more.

❄

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Artwork by Michael Kucharski

The Family Tree

by Ron Collins

"We are dying, and I shall be the first to go." Ryl sat at her root and shivered. She grimaced with each frail movement, and the other women offered her words of comfort.

Lyra's voice rose above them. "It is Gorduin. He must be stopped."

"How? We cannot leave the forest for long enough to confront him," Ryl replied.

"One of us has yet to be linked to her tree."

There was a hushed gasp among the women.

"You mean your daughter?" Ryl finally said.

"Yes. I suggest I leave and bring Kerna here. She is the only one of us who can stand against Gorduin."

"But you will die if you leave your tree."

"If I gather all of our magic, it should sustain me long enough to return with her."

The night grew into the women's silence. Crickets and cicadas played their evening symphony and the call of a nocturnal animal accentuated the moment.

"She is but sixteen; her tree is not yet ready," Ryl said.

"Yes, she is young."

"She is our future."

"Again, correct. But, I can think of no alternative."

There was a murmur among the women. Their magic would not be easily given. But Gorduin was descended from the wizard whose curse had tied them to their trees; they would not take his threat lightly.

Finally, Ryl spoke for the grove. "Take the magic. We will die either way."

Kerna loved it when her father played his music. It meant the day had gone well. It meant food in her stomach and a warm fire in the hearth. It meant they would not spend the evening brooding over where her mother had gone two years ago, or why she had left them.

He played an old oaken reed, one that had been her grandfather's, and his father's before that. Dark spots stained the oakwood. Smooth rings the size of silver coins were worn into the finger grips and tone holes. Kerna planted herself on a soft pillow, laid her head on crossed arms, and let the fire's warmth seep through her. Her muscles relaxed and rid themselves of the leaden load that accompanied every evening.

A sound invaded her luxury, a sound so quiet that, at first, she almost missed it. But her father stopped playing and the sudden silence exposed the soft squeak of the door's inward swing.

Kerna turned her head and opened her eyes. Standing at the door was a robed figure — short and slight. Kerna strained to see further, but the evening's darkness hid any additional features until the figure stepped forward. The

robe was deep green and tied at the waist with a heavy belt made of coarse, woven hemp. A hood cloaked the intruder's face.

"Begone ye, wizard!" her father said as he stood to defend them.

The figure's hands slowly rose. They were fine hands, soft and clean. They closed on the hood, seeming to caress the material as they pulled it back.

Kerna gasped.

Her father stopped in mid-stride. "Lyra?"

Her mother had returned. Kerna's heart beat against her chest and blood burned in her cheeks. A shiver ran down her spine. Her life could go back to normal. She would do her daily chores and help her mother ready the evening meal; nights would be time to play and listen to her father's music. Then the shiver of joy became a spasm. Why had she gone? She looked beautiful, slim; her hair was thick and full, her face unscarred and smooth. She did not look at all as if she had weathered a hard escape from anywhere. Had she really abandoned Kerna, as the other girls whispered?

A cold wind blew through the open door, making Kerna's skin goosebump. Red and brown leaves skittered across the earthen floor as her mother reached for the door and swung it shut.

"What are you doing here?" her father said.

"I'm sorry, there is no time for pleasantries. Kerna must come with me." She held out her arm to Kerna, her hand palm-up and her fingers curled into a gentle beckon.

Kerna felt a sudden attachment, a completeness as if a hollow spot in her chest had suddenly filled.

"You can't have her."

"Don't fight this, Jonah. It is important."

"No. This is not going to happen to me again."

Lyra's face softened and her eyes took on depth. She smiled lightly. "Kerna will have a final call, but this is not it. This is something different."

Kerna stood and faced her mother. "I'll go," she said.

"No, Kerna." Her father's face had a firm set but he made no attempt to block her. The firelight combined with age to draw deep curves over his cheeks and accentuate his eyes with half-moon shapes.

Kerna felt her mother's contact from across the room. An overpowering aroma of spicy perfume and fresh-cut wood stung her nose. Kerna walked toward her and took her hand. Her mother's skin was silky and moist; her firm grip enclosed Kerna's hand and drew her closer. The folds of the green robe wrapped around her. The room grew fuzzy and the floor melted away.

The undergrowth crunched beneath Kerna's feet and the hoots and howls of night creatures reached her ears. The smell of fresh pine rode on the gentle night breeze. Kerna and her mother stood in a small clearing amidst a forest that filtered the light of the full moon so that she could scarcely determine much else about her surroundings.

She looked at her mother. "Is it really you?"

"Yes."

"Why did it take you so long to come back to us?"

Kerna's mother held both of her hands and knelt on one knee, allowing Kerna to tower over her. "I am so sorry. You cannot know how much I miss you and your father."

"Then why did you leave us?"

Her mother's grip moved to Kerna's upper arms. "What has your father told you about me? About us?"

"Father speaks only of your leaving."

Her mother was silent. Kerna's eyes adjusted to the darkness and she saw moonlight glisten from her mother's tear-streaked cheek. Leaves rustled. The cry of a bird of prey resonated through the trees.

Finally, her mother spoke. "I did not wish to leave you. But we are cursed, Kerna. I had no choice."

Kerna's silence prompted her mother further.

"You are a dryad. Do you know what that is?"

Artwork by Michael Kucharski

Kerna gazed warily at her mother.

"A nymph, a wood faerie," her mother continued.

The words ran through her head but didn't quite register. Of course, she knew of wood faeries. Her friends told stories about faerie magic and beautiful women who were half-tree and half-human. But this made no sense.

"How ...?" was all that Kerna could muster as a reply.

"I am a dryad, too. As was my mother, and hers."

The world spun under Kerna's feet. Was she dreaming? "What is this curse?" she finally said.

Her mother looked up at her with wide eyes that reflected the moonlight. "Centuries ago, one of our ancestors was to be wed to a powerful warlock. She chose to elope with a common woodsman instead. The wizard was so enraged that he placed this curse.

"Each of our line finds true love in a human mate, just as I did with your father. It is a love that is greater than any you can imagine. We bear a single daughter, as I bore you. When she is born, a tree sprouts in our grove, as did one at your birth and at mine. And, when that tree is ready to accept a permanent resident, we are called to it. Our true loves are unable to follow and we are tied to our trees, consigned to live our lives separated from them."

Kerna's mother sighed deeply and pointed to the small tree that stood directly in front of them. "This is your tree," her mother said.

Kerna stepped closer to examine it. While it was no sapling, it was young; she could easily have encircled the trunk with her arms. Kerna reached out and touched it. Leaves rustled with her contact, a soft, gentle hiss that she found comforting.

She looked at her mother's face. There was pride and dignity in her eyes — and a sorrow hidden somewhere deep underneath them.

"You told Father that it was not my time. Why am I here?"

Kerna's mother grimaced. "Look closely — tell me what you see."

Kerna peered through the darkness. At first, in the moonlight, they all appeared to be normal, sturdy oaks. But eventually she began to notice things. Patches of mold or fungus grew on many of the trunks; branches drooped and sagged; leaves had holes eaten through them. The sight disturbed her.

"What is it?" she finally asked.

"The whole forest is dying."

"Why?"

"Gorduin, a descendant of the wizard who cast our curse, is draining minerals and nutrients from the ground. We are slowly starving to death."

Kerna contemplated the statement.

"How can I help?"

Her mother turned to stare directly into Kerna's eyes. "Our trees hold our magic; we want you to enter our trees and take this magic. Then you must go face Gorduin."

They took each other's hands and stood in silence, listening to the night's noise. The forest wrapped itself around her — the smell of dried wood, a screech owl's cry of victory, the creaks and groans of trees moving in the wind. Her mother's hands were warm. Kerna felt the synchronized beat of their hearts and felt her mother's love for her and for her father.

"How do I enter the trees?"

Kerna struggled up a rocky hillside toward Gorduin's castle. The building was made of mortared stone and brick, and adorned with wooden doors and shutters. A thin trail of smoke rose from a chimney and dispersed into the early morning overcast.

Her body tingled and the hair on her arms and legs stood on end. Individual dryad magic was not strong, but in the collective it was substantial. Kerna hoped it would be enough.

There were trees in the area to cover most of her approach, and she easily made it to the huge door without being seen. She ran her fingers over the wood. It was dead, stained and sealed with oil. But it was still wood, and her magic was strong. She spoke gently to the door, begging its forgiveness and preparing it for her assault.

Once she felt it was ready, Kerna stepped through the door. It felt just like stepping into her family's trees, a pleasant sensation, a feeling that the top layer of her skin was being gently scrubbed.

The castle was smaller on the inside than she had imagined. Cramped and cold, the hallway was made of yellow brick, and was lit by small tallow lamps that burned from within wall sconces.

Kerna slipped through the hall without a sound. At its end she found a narrow staircase that led upward. She followed it and entered a small room

Artwork by Michael Kucharski

that opened to an outdoor platform. Soft noises could be heard emanating from the area, scratches and the low tones of a male voice. Kerna approached the doorway with slow, even steps.

She eased her head around the open doorway.

Kerna almost gasped. The balcony was huge and opened to a dramatic view of the canyon behind the castle. Plant life of all kinds covered a majority of the floor space.

She crouched low and picked a slow path toward the sounds. Finally, she was able to peer through a broad-leafed fern and see Gorduin.

He was younger than she had expected, probably no older than twenty — and thin, but not so spindly as to appear weak. His long, straw-colored hair hung loosely around his shoulders and Kerna could see his features were fair. The blue of his morning robe blended with the gray of the platform's stone to give the illusion that he was a carved statue rather than a living human.

Kerna was astonished to see that Gorduin was holding an open palm toward a small, gray squirrel — feeding the creature crushed nuts and cooing softly as he did it. The image was in stark contrast to the one she had envisioned.

She shook her head — these thoughts must be avoided. She was here to save her family, and Gorduin was their murderer.

Kerna moved through the foliage and approached Gorduin from behind. Her movements were, again, silent, her breathing controlled. She aligned her thoughts and began to channel her newfound magic toward her heart as her mother had taught her. She drew to within arm's reach before the squirrel gave a high-pitched squeal and scurried away; its fright made Gorduin look up, and his astonishment was easily visible.

"What —"

Kerna touched his shoulder and funneled all the magic she could through her body. She felt power in its release, power that she could have never imagined. Her mind went blank. All she knew was the feeling of golden tendrils surging from her fingers and into Gorduin, searching for his essence, yearning to snuff it out.

There it was. She felt his soul and held his life in her hands. In an instant, her family would be saved.

Then she felt Gorduin's response. Their magic clashed with golden and blue sparks, exploding with such force as to throw the two apart.

Kerna was shocked by the collision. But she was more shocked by what she had felt when her dryad magic had held his soul.

She looked across to the corner where the explosion had thrown Gorduin. His head had hit the wall, and blood oozed thickly from a wicked gash. His face went suddenly ashen.

Kerna spoke. "There is nothing but good inside of you. Why are you killing my family?"

"I am sorry. Until our souls touched I was unaware of the suffering I was causing. I was experimenting — trying to end this curse." His voice trailed off as if his attention waned.

"But your family is the one which placed it — only my family has been damaged by it."

"Not true. Ever since that curse has been laid, we have undergone terrible misfortune. My brother was killed by marauding thieves, my father fell victim to a terrible disease, my grandfather ... ." A deep coughing fit interrupted his thought. "My grandfather was killed in a landslide. It goes on through my entire lineage. I wanted to stop the curse so that my future children may live full lives."

Kerna sat in silence. She looked closely at Gorduin. His eyes were dilated and his skin was porcelain white.

She stood and strode quickly to his side. Her hand went to his forehead and she felt beads of clammy sweat. Gorduin started to raise his hand, then dropped it again to his side.

"Do not worry." Gorduin's voice was a rasped whisper. "I am the last of my family. The magic that drains the dryad's forest will die with me. Your family is saved."

His eyes rolled upward and he became unconscious.

"Perhaps there is another way to break this curse," Kerna whispered.

She held his head between her hands and focused her energy again. Again, dryad magic flowed from her to him as she searched for Gorduin's essence. And, once again, she found it.

It was broken.

She wrapped her tendrils around Gorduin. But this time, she did not seek to extinguish his spirit. Instead, she searched deep into her own soul and found warmth and energy. She channeled it through their linkage, pouring more and more of herself into him.

When she was spent, she withdrew and waited.

Kerna sat by the nighttime fire and rocked the cradle that held her sleeping granddaughter.

"Mother?"

"Yes, Celene," Kerna replied.

"Is little Lyra all right? It is getting cold. Is she covered?"

"Yes," Kerna said, her face breaking into wide creases as she smiled. The babe was fine, but her daughter's question reminded Kerna of the coming winter. She wrapped her shawl tighter around herself.

A deep breath rattled through her lungs. She thought of another night, so many years ago when her own mother had returned. The thought reminded her of the forest — of the tree that held her mother and of her father's grave lying at its foot, of her own tree, waiting for her to take up residence, of the trees of Celene and little Lyra. Those trees would no longer call them away from their true loves, but would always be ready.

Kerna looked up and watched Celene finish the evening dishes. A smile crept to her face as she remembered her daughter's expression when she had been introduced to her dryad family.

Music started — the thin song of an old reed with age-stained spots, worn finger grips, and smooth tone holes. Kerna's gaze left her granddaughter and moved to the other side of the fireplace.

There was Gorduin. He was aged — stooped by the years and scarred by wrinkles and deep lines. He held her father's reed in his hands and, with his eyes closed, played the melody.

She watched him sway gently with the music, and she hummed softly in accompaniment. She hummed for the years they had lived together, and for the love that had broken the curse that once stained both of their houses. And, even after all these years, she hummed for the warmth he brought to her heart.

The love she felt for him was greater than any she could ever imagine. ❄

Ron Collins lives in Columbus, Indiana, with his wife, daughter, and cat.

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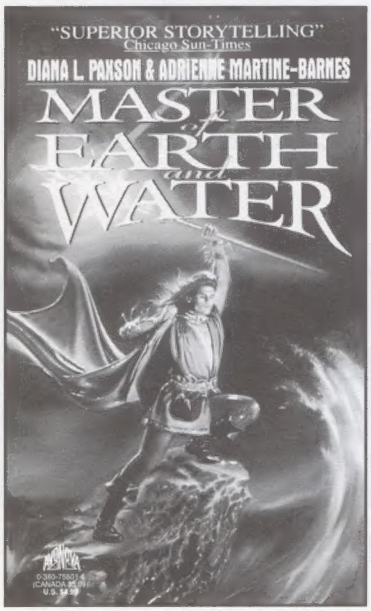

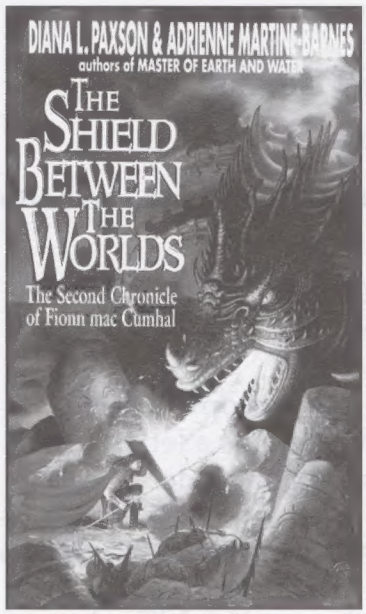
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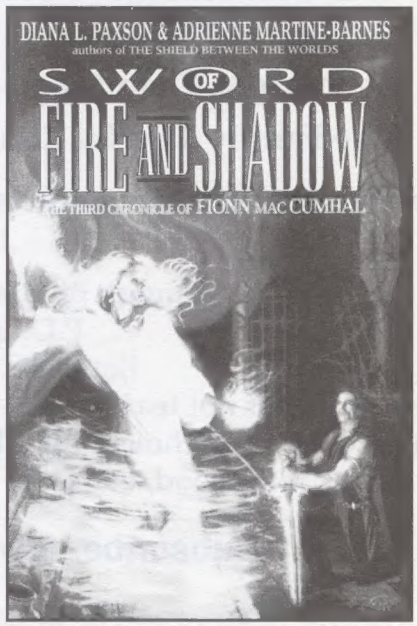
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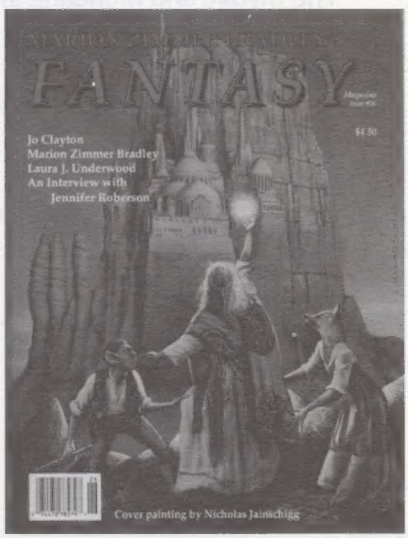

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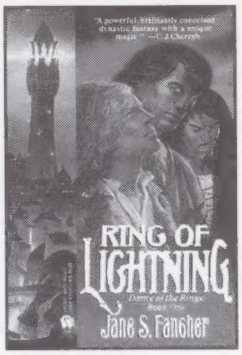

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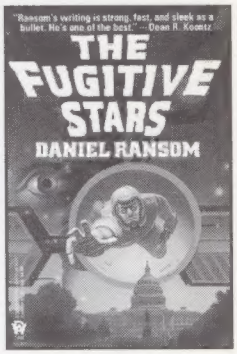

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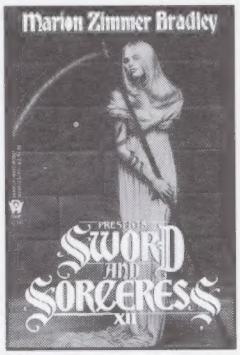

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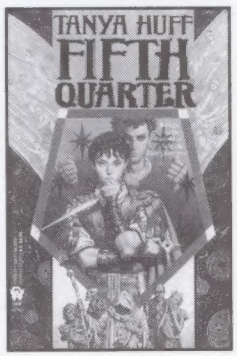

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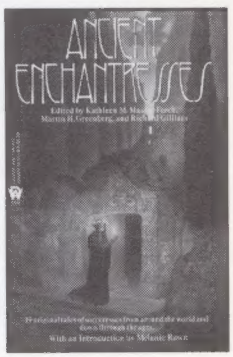

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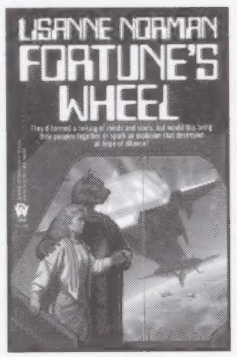

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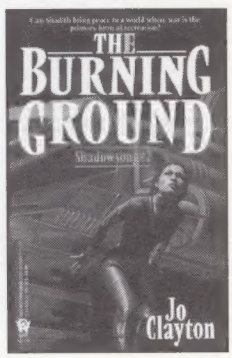

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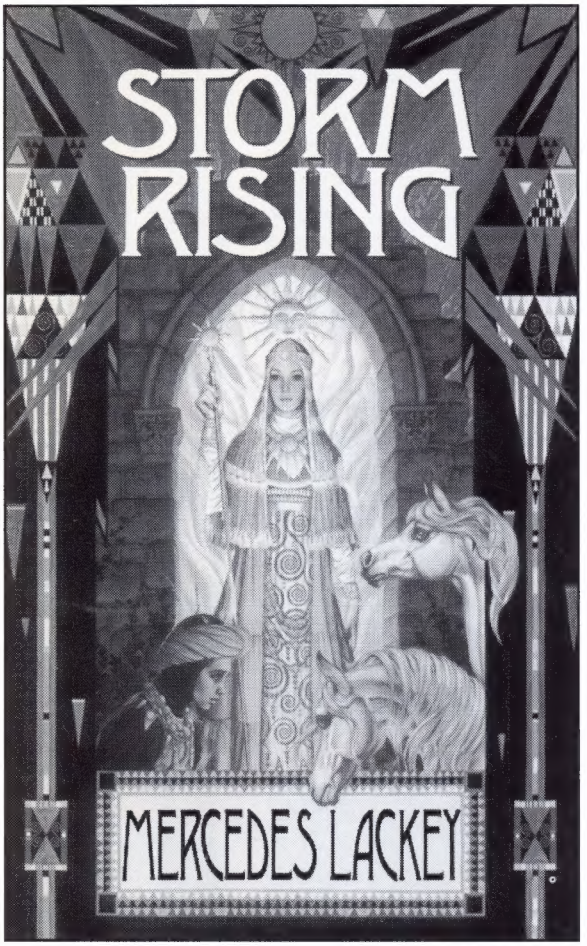

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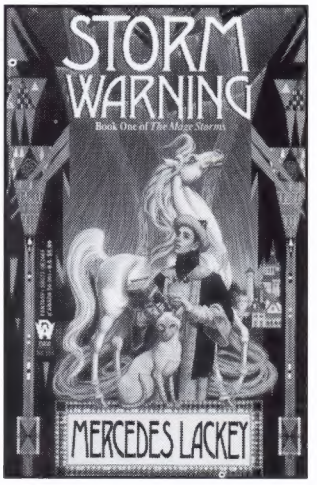

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